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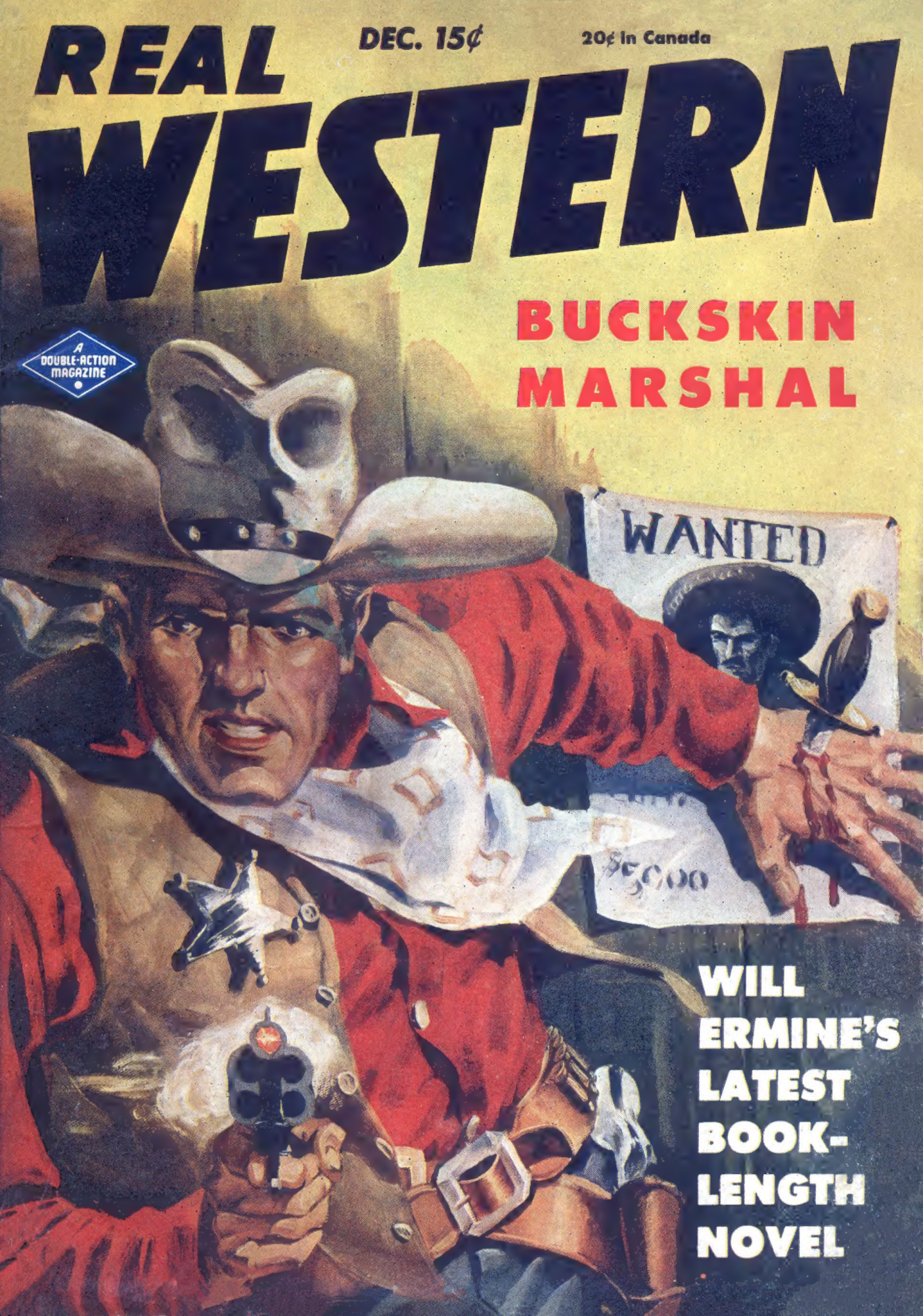
BUCKSKIN MARSHAL



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REAL WESTERN

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

Volume 10 ★ ★ December, 1944 ★ ★ Number 4

POWERFUL NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

BUCKSKIN MARSHAL.....**By Will Ermine** 10

Marshal Steve Gant knew that Mart Ducker's hirelings had bushwhacked his father and burned out the ranch; he knew, too, that they had arranged the murder for which he was being forced to trail his brother, Jeff. But a lawman can't go outside the law, even to trap criminals, and Steve had to bide his time, waiting for the lawless to hang themselves with their own overconfidence; hoping that Jeff wouldn't go too far on the owlhoot trail he'd been forced to ride in order to save his neck!

SHORT STORY

BOOTHILL TRAP.....**By Lee Floren** 95

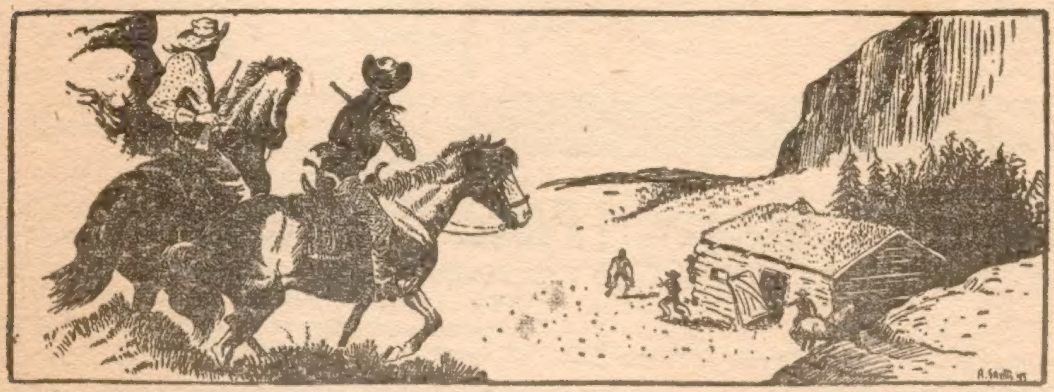
Sometimes a man's even worse than he's painted!

FACT ARTICLE

WILLIAM COMSTOCK—INJUN FIGHTER.....**By Kenneth P. Wood** 103

A true story of the Old West.

Cover by Leslie Ross *Robert W. Lowndes, Editor*



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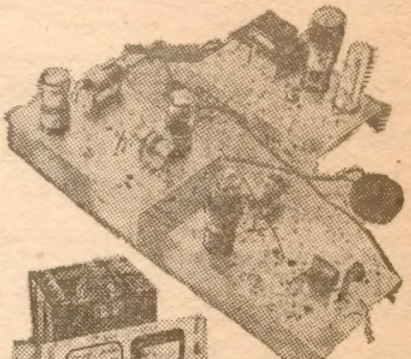

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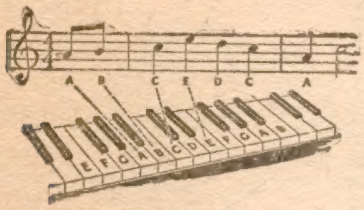
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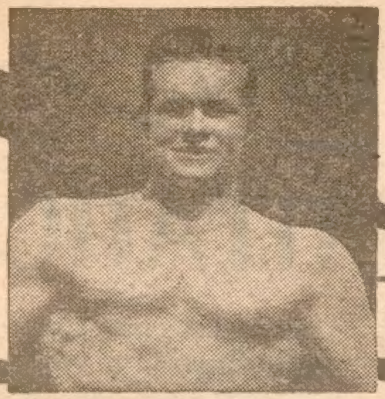

J. G. O'BRIEN

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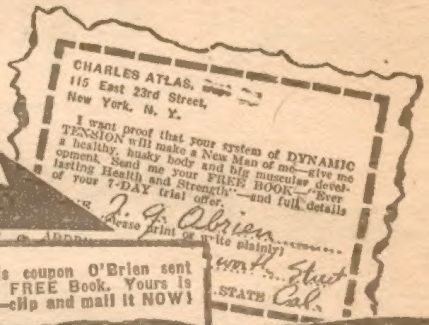
This is an ordinary snapshot of one of Charles Atlas' Californian pupils.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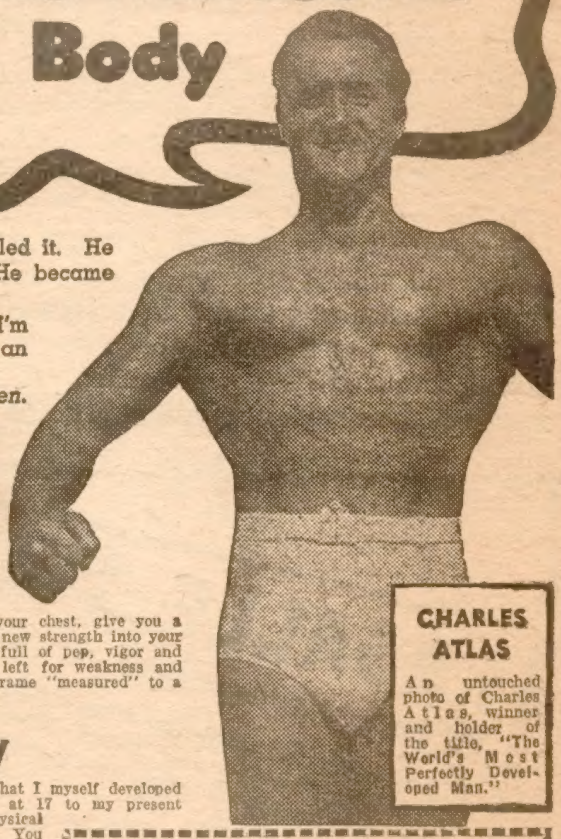

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BUCKSKIN

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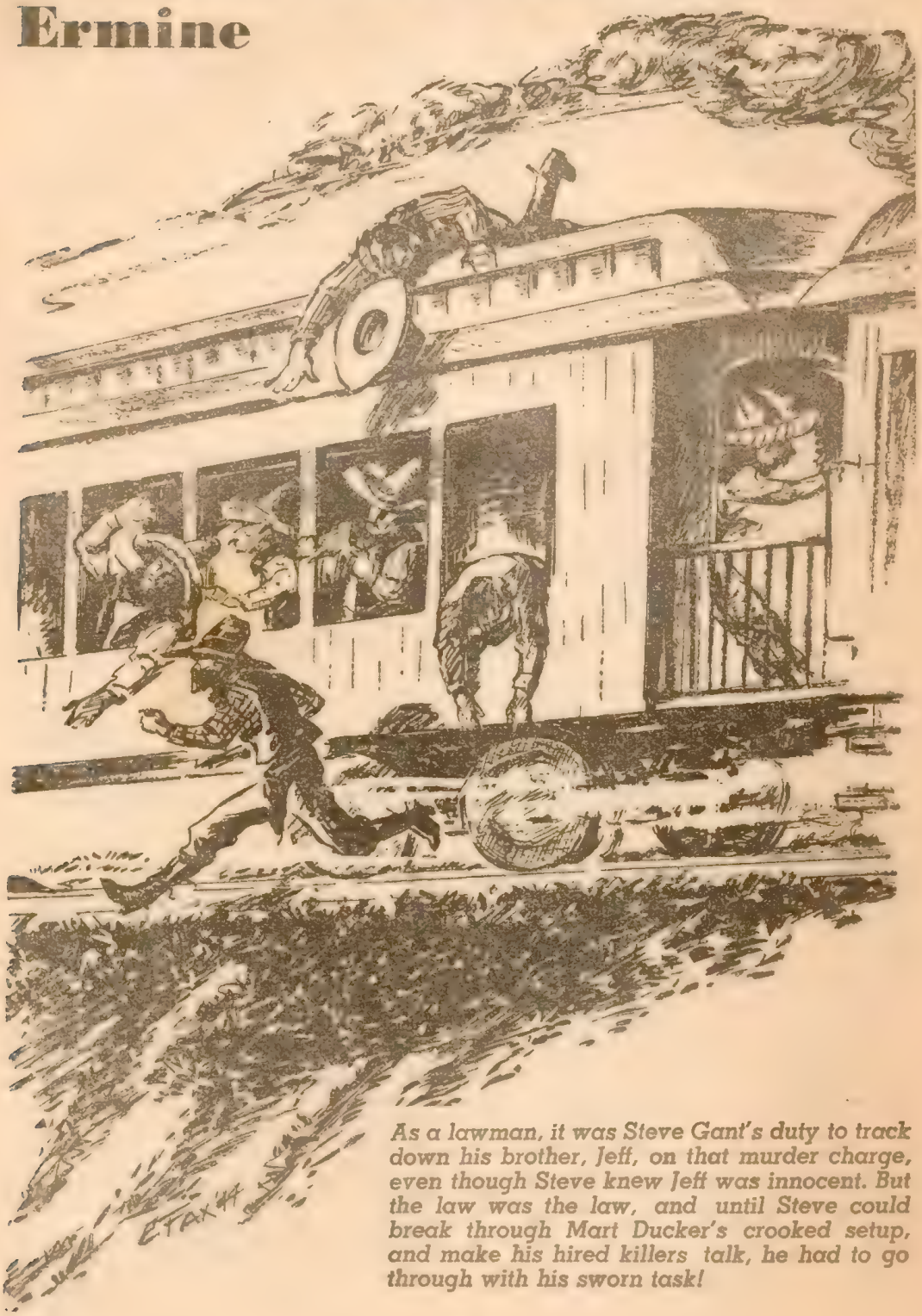
The masked brigands were looting the train.

MARSHAL

Ermine



As a lawman, it was Steve Gant's duty to track down his brother, Jeff, on that murder charge, even though Steve knew Jeff was innocent. But the law was the law, and until Steve could break through Mart Ducker's crooked setup, and make his hired killers talk, he had to go through with his sworn task!

IT WAS LATE. Save for a dozing brakeman, Stephen Gant, U. S. marshal for Western Colorado, had the observation car to himself. He was widely travelled in that part of the state, and the glimpses he caught of mining camps and one-street cow towns, as the Salt Lake Express tore through the blackness of the spring night, told him where he was.

The train clicked past a station and the conductor came back and sat down with him.

"How are we doing, Tom?" Gant asked.

"Right on the dot. We'll be dropping you off at Broken Mesa in about twenty minutes. I suppose there'll be someone at the station to take you to the ranch."

"I expect Jeff will be there; I wired him I'd be on Number 7. If he hasn't been able to make it, I can get a horse from old Smoky."

Tom Collins, the conductor, nodded. He and Steve were well acquainted. "I hate to see you going home on an errand like this," he said; "I knew your father a long time. When I was running freight on this division, I used to see him pretty regular in the Mesa. Do you know how it happened, Steve?"

"Just what I read in the newspapers; Jeff's telegram didn't add anything to that. But I can use my imagination; the Ducker combination has been crowding him. I'm sure it stemmed out of that trouble." Gant's gray eyes narrowed soberly in his lean face. He was a tall, square-shouldered man, still in his early thirties. "I saw this coming a long while back. Three years ago, when Martin Ducker organized the sheepmen and started his Drover's League, he made no secret of his plans to turn all this country into sheep range. Soon after he began reaching out beyond Broken Mesa, Ducker offered the old man a fair price for the place. I tried to persuade him to take it, but he wouldn't listen to it; no sheepman was going to run him out."

The conductor nodded again. "I can just hear old Carse saying it. I don't have to tell you your father was a tough customer to handle when he got the bit in his teeth; he could call a spade a spade. Not knowing anything about the circumstances, or who got him, I'll still venture the opinion that he was cut down without having a chance, or he'd have got in a shot or two. Weren't your brothers on the ranch?"

"Just Jeff; the kid is at the university in Boulder. His last year." Gant shook his head grimly. "I can't understand it; Jeff must have known what was up. Of course, if someone was out to bushwhack the old man, they'd have found an opportunity sooner or later no matter how closely you watched him." His mouth was a tight, resolute line as he glanced out the window. "This is one killing that will be settled to my satisfaction before the books are closed on it."

THE conductor gave him a shrewd glance. "Settled according to law—or otherwise, Steve? Certain influences are so strong around here that the little fellow doesn't seem to have much chance in a court of law. You know; I'm not telling you anything new."

"Maybe that condition will get a little airing, too," Gant muttered. "This county's got a good sheriff in Smoky Guthrie; I figure between Smoky and myself we can get to the bottom of this murder. I'm not going to be satisfied with just closing the account of the blackleg who shot the old man; I want the gent who hired him to do his rotten work, and I don't care how big he is."

"Yeh," Collins acknowledged. Without mentioning any names Steve had made himself perfectly clear. He was not in the habit of saying more than he meant. The conductor knew it, and he had a great respect for this quiet, soft-spoken man who had brought the law to the far corners of the wild, outlaw-infested country west of the Continental Divide. Mart Ducker might corrupt judges and intimidate county sheriffs, but all his money and power wouldn't stop Steve Gant, whose sobriquet of Buckskin Marshal was a homely tribute to his ability to "go and fetch 'em," not

because he ever wore fringed buckskins.

Collins glanced at his watch and spoke of other things without being able to put Ducker out of his mind. Martin Ducker's success had been phenomenal. He had started from scratch, as so many sheepmen did, and by hard work and a ruthless disregard for the rights of others had built up the biggest sheep ranch in the western half of the state. With that for a beginning, he had launched his sheepman's cooperative association and made himself the head of it. Almost from the moment the organization was born it had ceased to be the innocent banding together of a number of stockmen for their mutual aid and protection; step by step Ducker had taken despotic control. He had made money for its members, but it was his iron will and hard fist that dictated its policy, and the fate of the few who had rebelled and withdrawn from the Drovers' League kept the others in line.

A long blast of the whistle brought Collins to his feet. "There's Ed blowing for the Mesa now," he said. "Better grab your bag, Steve. This is the first time in two months Number 7 has stopped here."

The train ground to a brief stop. Gant swung down from the rear car and started for the dark station. A voice hailed him from the shadows.

"Steve, is that you?"

"Yeh, Smoky!"

WHEN Gant reached the station platform, he found his brother Jeff and Rita Guthrie and her father waiting for him. Rita ran up to him and seized his hand sympathetically.

"This is a terrible home-coming for you, Steve! We're all a little bit stunned yet. . . Here is Jeff and Father."

The brothers gripped hands. Both were big men, so much alike they were often mistaken for twins. They spoke briefly, and Steve turned to the white-haired sheriff.

"I'm sorry I had to get you and Rita out of bed at this time of the night," he said. "I was away from the office yesterday and didn't get Jeff's wire until evening."

"That's all right," the sheriff told him. "Let me take your bag; we want you to stay with us till the funeral's over. Davenport brought your father in this afternoon. Jeff asked me about the arrangements, and I told him I thought it would be nice if the services were held here in town, instead of out to the ranch; there's so many folks will want to pay their respects to Carse."

"I think that was a good suggestion," said Steve. "Randy ought to be here in the morning."

"He'll be here at eight-ten," Jeff informed him. "I guess the kid's taking it pretty hard, Steve. It was cold-blooded murder; the old man never had a chance." Jeff Gant's voice was hard and bitter. "It was Ducker's work, all right! If you'd been here, it wouldn't have made any difference; they'd have got him anyhow."

"I'm afraid that's true," Guthrie agreed. "Neither one of you boys has any reason to blame yourself. This killin' was carried out accordin' to plan."

"Just how did it happen?" Steve asked grimly.

"The old man drove into town yesterday," Jeff explained. "He started home in the evening. I was asleep when I thought I heard him drive into the yard; but he didn't come into the house. I called to him and didn't get any answer. I went out to investigate, then, and found just the empty rig. There was a pool of blood on the seat. I ran down to the bunkhouse and got Scotty and Pete and we started back along the road, looking for him. We found him just about daylight. He'd been dead for hours."

"Vollmer's Crick," Smoky said. "They waited for him in those willow brakes and jest filled him full of lead. They made it look like robbery. They turned his pockets inside out, took the few dollars he had on him and his silver watch. When the job was done, they turned back to town."

"How many were there?"

"Accordin' to the hoss tracks in the

willows, two. No other clues or evidence."

"I'VE got all the evidence I need," Jeff rapped. "The League bought Chris Etten's place a couple weeks ago. When we tried to get up to our north pasture, we found the road closed. Joe Spangler, Ducker's field boss was there. He told the old man the road was closed and would stay closed, and to hell with us. If we didn't like it, we could sell out or take the consequences. He had a couple of his gun-slingers hanging around."

"Who were they, Jeff?"

"Yampa Jackson and Ike Slack. I'm telling you here and now, Steve, they're the rats that killed father. Spangler thought he had us when he closed the road, but the old man wasn't licked; he set us to cutting a road of our own over Squaw Mountain the next day. There was only one other way Spangler could stop him, and he took it. It's up to us to square it, Steve. If that law badge you're wearing and your oath means you've got to keep out of it, I'll attend to it myself."

"I know how you feel, Jeff," the sheriff put in quickly, "but you'll do a lot better to let the law handle this. But suppose we get along; Rita has a little snack waitin' for us. We can talk things over when we get to the house. I reckon you boys won't mind bunkin' together."

In the past, one of Steve Gant's chief reasons for returning periodically to Broken Mesa was to see Rita Guthrie again. Even tonight, sobered by the death of his father, his spirits got a lift out of her walking along at his side. In the old days, when the Mesa had been all cowtown, the lights had burned all night in a dozen saloons. There were less than half that number in business now, and they were dark by midnight; the cowpunchers who had made things lively for so long had moved on to greener pastures, and the Mexican herders that the League brought up every spring spent very little of their meagre wages carousing in town.

"I hope this trouble won't keep Randy from finishing at Boulder," Rita remarked.

"It won't if I have anything to say about it," Steve said flatly. He glanced at her with quickened interest. "What put that idea in your head?"

"He may feel his place is on the ranch with Jeff, now."

Steve shook his head. "The kid's got bigger things than that ahead of him. The old man always wanted him to be a lawyer. I know he'll make a good one. . . Have you been hearing from him?"

"Yes, oftener than I've heard from you, Steve. Your job keeps you busy, I know."

Steve Gant nodded silently, and there was a new measure of sober thoughtfulness on his lean, tight-lipped face as they turned off the main street to the gate of the white clap-board house where the Guthries had lived for years. It had never occurred to him before that she might be interested in Randy. But once the thought had crossed his mind, he could not dismiss it. It drove home the realization that they were of an age and that it was not only Rita who had grown up.

"We're going to put you and Jeff in the front bedroom," she said, as they stepped inside. "I'll make some coffee; the three of you can sit here and talk until I call you."

Every nook and cranny of this house was familiar to Steve Gant. The ties that bound him to the Guthries were many. He had been just a raw kid off a small cow ranch when Smoky had pinned a star on him and made him his deputy. That he was now a U. S. marshal was largely due to the old man's influence and work in his behalf.

"It's like old times, havin' you in the house again, Steve," the sheriff said on returning from the bedroom. "Things have changed a lot in the last couple years; you only have to walk up from the station to see it. I'm afraid the old days are gone forever."

"You know they are," Jeff declared bitterly. "Ducker's ruined this country. But he can be stopped; this

ain't the first time his thugs have got in their work!"

"We want to be sure before we do anything," Steve advised quietly.

"SURE? How much surer do you have to be than you are now? The old man had no other enemies. You don't mean to tell me a couple of these Mexicans stuck him up, do you?"

"No. I'm just as sure you're right as you are. I believe Ducker sent Spangler up here with orders to bring Carson Gant to terms, or else. But if we hope to pin this killing on Mart Ducker, it won't do us any good to shove a gun into Joe Spangler's belly and pull the trigger. We've got to have some evidence."

"Yeh?" Jeff growled. "Where are you going to get it?"

"That'll be up to Smoky and me; we'll break this case. It may take a little time. Spangler is smart enough, but Yampa Jackson and Slack haven't any brains. If they were the actual killers, they left themselves open somewhere." Steve turned to the sheriff. "Do you know where they are, Smoky?"

"They're around town. I figgered I'd let 'em spread themselves a little and see if they did any talkin' before I questioned 'em. In the meantime, I've let it be known that I figger it was someone driftin' through the country, headed for that outlaw roost in Brown's Park, that did the job."

"You ain't fooling no one, Smoky," Jeff Gant retorted bluntly. "If you put it up to the people of this town, ninety per cent of them would tell you it was Ducker's gang that killed our father. Everyone I meet tells me that. You and Steve talk about evidence. What sort of a case do you think you'd have to have to get anywhere with Judge Ogilvie and that other worm who's the district attorney of this county? They know which side of the bread their butter's on. When this same Yampa Jackson almost slugged Ben Colquitt to death last fall, they dismissed the charge for lack of evidence, didn't they? And Ben even had a witness."

"That's just another reason why I'm telling you to go slow." Steve's tone was edged with annoyance. "I understand your talk, Jeff, and I'm telling you you're all wrong; Ducker wouldn't want anything better than a chance to have you jugged for a gun-play. He knows we'll stick together. He knew when he sent Spangler up here and turned him loose on the old man that I'd hold him to account. But that didn't stop him; he figures he's so strong he can thumb his nose at me and get away with it. I'm willing to let him think so for the present. It'll take patience and maybe a lot of waiting to get that wolf, but if you'll play it my way, we'll nail him, and all of his money and backing won't help him."

"I'm not taking any more pushing around from that bunch!" Jeff flared back angrily. "I've been living with it; you've been away. I don't expect you to feel about it like I do. You were always urging the old man to sell out to Ducker. Is that still your idea?"

"It would be the smart thing to do. Take a look around and see what's happening to this range. Where there was good graze before, there's big patches of bronco grass now. The sheep are bringing the damned stuff in. The burrs stick to their wool, and they carry it wherever they go. The wind does the rest. Sheep will eat the stuff; cattle won't. Before this thing is finished it's going to be the same story here that cowmen got in Nevada and across the line from the Navajo Reservation. You can blast the Drovers' League higher than a kite and put Ducker and his crowd under the sod, and it won't stop it; the harm's been done, and you know it!"

CHAPTER II

Hired Guns

JEFF GANT'S mouth turned up contemptuously. "You've changed a lot, haven't you?" he jerked out excitedly. "I'm not thinking about money, or what the place is going to be worth! I know the graze is petering out; but after what that bunch of snakes did to the old man, I wouldn't take their dirty

money, or let them run me out, no matter what they offered! You and Randy are going to have something to say about what happens. If it were left to me, I'd stick with the ranch as long as I had grass enough to keep one cow going!"

"No reason for the two of you to get excited like this," old Smoky put in conciliatingly. "You're both under a strain tonight. You'll see eye to eye when you've had time to think things over."

He glanced toward the kitchen and was relieved to see Rita come in.

"I guess everything is ready," she said, quick to sense the tension in the air. Her glance ran from Jeff to Steve. "Is there something wrong?"

"Nothing serious," the latter assured her. "Jeff and I just don't see some things the same way." He turned to his brother. "Before we drop the subject, Jeff, I want you to know I'm not claiming any interest in the ranch; you stuck with it, and it's yours. I know the kid will feel the same way about it. If he needs any help before or after he passes his bar examination, I'll see to it."

He was not a demonstrative man, but he put his hand on his brother's arm and they followed Rita and her father into the kitchen.

"It's like being home to draw a chair up to this table," he said. "I still remember the first meal I had here. A taffy-haired little girl in pigtails was doing the cooking. She was a very dignified person, full of no-sirs and yes-sirs, and she sat all through the meal with a streak of soot on her nose without knowing it."

Rita laughed. "I remember it, too. You called me Miss Guthrie. It was the first time anyone had. I guess that's why I've always been fond of you, Steve." She caught Jeff's eye. "Do you remember those bat-wing chaps he used to wear? He was as thin as a bean-pole in those days. When I used to see him coming up the street with those chaps flapping, I was always reminded of a June bug walking on its hind legs."

Smoky chuckled. "He didn't have nothin' on Jeff; both of 'em was as lean as razorbacks, and one as sassy as the other."

It was conversation of a sort to clear the air. Jeff's mouth lost its sullenness.

"The Fighting Gants they used to call us," he said. "That didn't mean anything to the old man; if we didn't toe the line, he was ready to lay us out."

Steve's glances stole across the table to Rita Guthrie. He told himself she grew lovelier every time he saw her. There was something proud and courageous and forthright about her that filled him with a deep sense of humility. If he searched the world over, he thought, he would not find her equal.

Rita had just asked him to pass his cup, when she said suddenly: "Listen!"

UNMISTAKABLY, they caught the sharp drumming of shod hoofs on the hard-packed dirt road. Rita's smile faded. All her life men had been coming in the dead of night for her father, until a madly ridden horse and trouble had become synonymous in her mind.

"Whoever it is, he's pushin' that animal purty hard," the sheriff remarked." Maybe it's someone comin' in for the doctor."

The horseman pulled up in front of the house, however. A moment later, they heard him run up to the porch. Smoky got to his feet. By then, the man was banging on the door.

"Just a second!" the sheriff called. The Gants and Rita heard him open the door and caught his sharp exclamation of surprise. "Oh, it's you, Scotty!" he said.

"Is Jeff here?" the puncher demanded excitedly.

In the kitchen Jeff Gant was already out of his chair. "It's Scotty Ryan!" he cried. "There's something wrong at the ranch!" He ran to the front door, with Steve and Rita following. "What is it, Scotty?" he whipped out anxiously.

"We've lost the house, Jeff! The

skunks burned her down! Poured a can of coal oil over the front steps and touched it off! Pete and me did our damnedest to put it out, but she burned like tinder!"

Ryan saw Steve then and jerked a nod at him.

"Do you know who did it?" the marshal asked.

"I know one of 'em, shore enough! I put a slug through his guts! He wasn't dead when I started for town, but he ain't goin' to git well!"

"Who is it?" Jeff barked at him.

"Ike Slack!"

"Slack, eh! . . . Steve, are you beginning to believe I'm right? They kill the old man, and now they burn us out before he's in his grave! Don't talk to me about stalling around before we have a showdown!"

The marshal flashed a glance at Guthrie. "Don't let us waste time standing here talking. If we can get to the Mule Shoe before Slack kicks out, maybe we can get him to talk. You and Jeff run out to the barn and saddle some horses; I'll get my gunbelt and be with you in a second. You give them a hand, Scotty!"

The men hurried out. Steve was in the bedroom only a moment or two. Rita was waiting for him.

"Steve, look out for Jeff!" she said earnestly. "I know him; he's killing mad. No matter how right he is about it, if he goes gunning for Spangler it will be the end of everything for him. The League will never let up until they've railroaded him to the penitentiary or made him an outlaw. Father may be reluctant to admit it, but I know it's a fact."

"So do I, Rita. I'll stop him some way."

WITH her promise to meet the morning train if they were not back by then, Steve ran to the barn. He and the others were pounding out of town a few minutes later.

The driving pace at which they rode made conversation next to impossible. With their horses kicking the water to spray, they dashed across Spit Cat Creek an hour later. The road forked into the Mule Shoe in another mile. Riding into the ranch, they could see the still glowing embers of the fire. They swept on back to the bunkhouse. Jeff's cry brought Pete Downs, of late the only other member of Mule Shoe's crew, to the door.

"Where have you got Slack?" Steve demanded brusquely.

"He's in here," Pete told him. "The dirty skunk knows how to die. He's sufferin', but he ain't sayin' nuthin'."

The dying man met them with a hostile glance. Steve and the sheriff dropped down beside him.

"Yo're wastin' yore time," Slack muttered defiantly, his voice weak and pinched with pain. "I ain't got nothin' to say."

The marshal asked Jeff to fetch a lamp. A brief examination convinced him the man had only a few minutes to live.

"You've reached the end of your tether, Ike."

"I know it," was the blunt answer. "I ain't askin' no favors."

"There's a lot of sass in you for a man who's on the road to Judgment!" old Smoky snapped. "You lie still; I'm goin' to see what you've got on you!"

Slack was too weak to push the sheriff's hands away. The latter had found tobacco, a handful of silver coins and a heavy pocketknife, when he pulled out a watch. At sight of it Jeff Gant groaned and the lamp shook in his hands.

"It's the old man's watch!" he got out, with a throaty rasp. He glared threateningly at Slack. "You dirty rat! I knew it was you and Jackson that got him!"

"Do you deny it?" Steve demanded grimly.

"No," Slack answered, his lips barely moving. "I did it; Yampa Jackson had no hand in that shootin'."

"You're lying, Ide! Jackson was with you at Vollmer's Creek, and he was with you tonight. Why don't you tell the truth? It can't hurt you now. Ducker sent the two of you up here to take care of this job; Spangler told you how to handle it. Neither one of them will come within a mile of you now; they won't even

come through with the money to give you a decent burial. You're no more use to them. If you got back on your feet again, they wouldn't have anything to do with you. You made the mistake of getting caught with the goods, and when that happens, you're number is up with Mart Ducker; he'd sell you out the same way he did your brother Mose."

SLACK studied him with dull eyes for a long moment. "Yuh got a smooth tongue, Steve. What yuh gittin' at?"

"I think you know. Mose did too much talking after that trouble the League had at Lamar; that's why Ducker turned thumbs down on him. But he didn't stop there. Did you ever ask yourself how it happened that when Mose walked into the D. and R. G. station at Montrose to stick up the agent that he found me and two other marshals waiting for him?"

"Wal?" Slack muttered suspiciously.

"That tip came to me straight from Ducker. He came into my office in Silver City two days before and called the play to a turn. The whole thing was a plant. The money the agent had in the express box was League money."

Steve Gant was relating the inside story of the attempted robbery at Montrose for the first time. Smoky Guthrie expressed his surprise in a startled grunt. That business had sent Mose Slack to the Canon City pen for ten years.

"Yuh can't prove any of that," Ike muttered, his graying face contorted with hate. He knew more about the affair than he had ever admitted, and Steve's tale had confirmed a deep suspicion in him.

"I don't know what kind of proof you want," the marshal told him. "Mose knows he was framed. I had a talk with him the last time I was in Canon City. Maybe something he said will convince you. He wasn't going to pull that trick by himself; he had a partner. Only the two of them knew about it. At the last minute, his pal backed out. His name is Yampa Jackson; you can figure out the rest of it for yourself."

It convinced Slack. His reaction was so violent it brought on another hemorrhage and he writhed in agony. The sheriff and Scotty Ryan pinned him down. The man finally lay still, his minutes numbered. His eyes fastened on Steve.

"What do you want to know?"

"Did Ducker give you any idea of why he was sending you to Broken Mesa?"

"Yeh, we talked it over. He said we was to see Spangler; that Joe would give us our orders."

"Did he? Did Joe Spangler send you to Vollmer's Creek to kill the old man?"

"Yeh! He got the coal oil and sent us over here tonight."

"And Yampa Jackson was with you?"

"Yeh, it was him, the double-crossin' rat!"

STEVE called for paper and pen and hastily wrote down Slack's statement. The man was dead, however, before he could sign it.

"Reckon it doesn't make much difference whether he signed it or not," Guthrie observed. "You know the uncorroborated statement of an accomplice to a crime can be thrown out of court."

"That's the law," Steve acknowledged. "But we've got something to build on. We can take Jackson into custody on suspicion of arson and hold him on that charge for the present."

"If we can find him," Smoky declared skeptically. "They'll hurry him out of the country, Steve."

The marshal nodded. "We'll have to run him down."

"What about Spangler?" Jeff demanded fiercely. "After what you heard tonight do you mean to tell me you're going to keep your hands off him?"

"For the present," his brother said flatly.

"No!" Jeff raged. "If that's your way, it ain't mine! I'm looking him up tonight! Now!"

He gave his gun-belt an angry hitch and started for the door.

"Stand where you are!" Steve rapped.

Jeff started to shoulder him out of the way. He stopped when he saw the gun in the marshal's fist. He glared at it incredulously.

"So you'd even put a gun on me!"

"I'll do whatever is necessary to keep you from making a damned fool of yourself," was the cold, purposeful answer. "If you've got any brains, Jeff, now is the time to use 'em!"

CHAPTER III

The Iron Heel

WITH the coming of daylight the things Scotty and Pete had managed to save from the fire were carried into the bunkhouse. It was in this very bunkhouse, then the only building on the ranch, that Carson Gant had raised his family.

"You sit tight here," Jeff told the two men. "I'll be out right after the funeral."

"What about that thing over there under the trees?" Scotty asked.

"Leave it where it is," Smoky told him. "I'll send the coroner out early Ranscamp will ask you the usual questions. Don't say any more than you have to, and you and Pete keep what you heard from Slack strictly to yourselves."

"Be sure about that," Steve seconded. "Don't let a word slip to anyone. Spangler is going to wonder how much we know; that's exactly what I want him to do. I'll be around for a few days."

"You and Pete mind your own business and you won't have any more trouble for the present," Guthrie told Ryan, as he and the Gants were riding away. "That bunch will go slow till they know where they stand."

Barely exchanging a word, the thre men crossed the Spit Cat and headed back to town. They were sevral miles below the creek, when Steve's eyes narrowed. He was staring of to the east in the direction of the Red Bluffs. The whole range seemed to be moving. It was like a gray ripple flowing over the hills. He knew it was sheep—thousands of them—that the League was moving up to its newly acquired range on the old Etten ranch.

"There they come!" he growled. "Look at 'em! Ten to twelve thousand in that band!"

Smoky Guthrie snorted disgustedly. "Like locusts! I can smell the dang things from here!"

The bitterness stamped on Jeff's mouth deepened, but he had nothing to say. It was not his way to hold himself in. It told Steve plainer than print that the man's wrath had taken such complete possession of him that it was beyond his will even to try to give it expression. This consuming wrath would turn to brooding, implacable hatred, whipping him on to some reckless vengeance. It warned Steve that the greatest service he could do Jeff was to save him from himself.

"Maybe the kid can do it," Smoky thought; "he's always been able to twist Jeff around his finger."

When they reached town, they found Randy with Rita. The youngest of the Gants was barely twenty-one, not so tall as his brothers, but he had their gray eyes and black hair and the same strong mouth. Though he was shaken by the loss of his father, he had had time enough to steel himself for this meeting.

"We'll leave the boys alone together and let them talk things over," Smoky said. "I'll go down to the office."

"Not before we've had breakfast," Rita insisted. "We've been waiting for you; everything will be on the table by the time you're ready. Randy can talk to Steve and Jeff a little later."

"We've got no secrets from you, Rita," Steve said. "We'll talk while we eat; I want to go down to the office with your father."

FROM his conversation with her, Randy was familiar with some of the details of the tragedy. The story of what had happened at the Mule

Shoe that night shocked and inflamed him as it did Rita.

"I wish I were the prosecutor of this county," he said. "On the evidence you've already got, I'd get a conviction. Has Jesse Evers sold himself to Ducker?"

Smoky shrugged non-committally, but Jeff said flatly: "The League owns him lock, stock and barrel! If he tries to be reelected, he'll be snowed under. We've still got the votes to do it!"

"That'll be about seven months, Jeff."

"Yeh, and it's a long time to wait!"

"It's not too long—if we can put the right man in office. I want to put Mart Ducker and his Drovers League away for keeps, and I want it so badly I'm ready to wait seven months or seven times seven months, but I don't want to miss!"

Steve felt secretly relieved, hearing him talk like that, and when he went down the street with Smoky a few minutes later, he mentioned it.

"The kid's got sense," he declared proudly. "Jeff will listen to him, I believe."

The sheriff nodded. "Randy's got a level head. Too bad he ain't a mite older; we could run him for district attorney. Folks around here would know what was at stake, and they'd support him. The job don't pay much; fifteen hundred a year. A lawyer who's got any sort of a practice won't bother with it."

"Let's stop dreaming, Smoky," Steve said, with an indulgent smile. "If Yampa Jackson is around town this morning, where would we be apt to find him?"

"Star Hotel, or the Little Nugget bar; but I don't expect we'll be that lucky."

"Nor I. We'll have a look just the same. If we happen to locate him, we'll take him in for questioning. Don't tip anyone off to the fact that we want him."

They were in and out of the saloons and the Star Hotel for almost an hour without seeing anything of Yampa Jackson. They agreed that they were wasting their time and turned back to the sheriff's office.

"That buzzard is either making tracks, or Spangler's got him hid out," Smoky declared with conviction.

"Or he's dead," said Steve. "Joe Spangler wouldn't hesitate a second about putting him under the sod if he thought that was the best way out of this situation. If he figured we knew half as much as we do, Jackson's number would be up for certain."

"But that ain't the case. There's good reason for him to believe we don't know anything. What do you suppose Jackson's story was when he came back alone from settin' fire to the house? He heard Scotty's shot and must have seen Slack go down. They don't know but what Ike was dead when he hit the ground."

Gant nodded soberly. "We've got to convince them that that was the case. It would be a mistake to ask for a warrant on Jackson and start wiring around the state for peace officers to be on the watch for him. We want that bird, and we want him alive. I wouldn't even attempt to question Spangler."

Smoky stared at him from under his bushy brows. "That don't leave us anythin' to do but sit tight. I ain't got no fault to find with that, Steve. But how is Jeff goin' to take it? If he doesn't see some signs of action, how are you goin' to hold him in line?"

"By telling him the truth and adding a few trimmings. We can give him to understand we have asked the sheriffs of a dozen counties to be on the lookout for Jackson, but that we believe he's still near the Mesa, and that by holding off a little we'll give him the idea we haven't anything on him and he'll come out of hiding. Jeff ought to see the sense of that. We can back up our argument by telling him that as soon as we grab Jackson and force him to talk, we'll take Spangler into custody."

The sheriff shook his head skeptically. "I don't know whether that will do the trick or not. It might work for a few days."

"That'll be time enough; Spangler isn't going to sit out on the Etten

ranch for long without making some move to find out just where things stand. I believe he'll trip himself whatever he does. He'll only have to make one slip and we'll nail him."

"I can always send a few telegrams," Smoky muttered. "Suppose we walk down to the station; it'll make it look better if Jeff happens to see us."

THE messages he dispatched not only had nothing to do with Yampa Jackson but were calculated to cause some surprise and head-scratching when his fellow peace officers around the state received them. He and the marshal were in the station half an hour or more. When they started back up the street, they saw Jeff and young Randy hurrying toward them.

"You can stop wasting your time looking for Jackson around here!" Jeff told them. "Cass Southard and his wife have come in for the funeral. We were just talking to them. Cass says he saw Yampa Jackson pass his place just after daylight and he wasn't wasting any time along the way."

"Which way was he heading?" Steve asked.

"North, into the Organ Mountains! He'll go through Spanish Pass and either cross into Utah or lose himself down on the Uncompahgre Plateau. You fellows will never pick him up now!"

"I don't know about that," Smoky objected. "They never run so far you can't dig 'em out. He'll find we've got a net spread for him," he added, lying with convincing authority.

It gave Steve a moment in which to adjust his story to this new development. "This isn't the worst news we could hear," he said. "At least, we know he hasn't been rubbed out to keep him from saying anything. If we're smart, we'll lay off of Spangler for a few days and give him a chance to talk. He'll have to say something. He can put the rope around his neck with his lying."

"It's worth trying," Randy acknowledged. "It leaves you with an ace up your sleeve; you can always get tough with him."

Jeff's mouth lifted scornfully. "Appears all three of you are lined up against me. You let Jackson slip through your fingers. Are you going to do the same thing with Spangler?"

"You needn't worry about that," the sheriff countered. "Joe won't run, not with his backing."

"He won't, if I know it! When the funeral's over, I'm going back to the Mule Shoe and keep my eye on him! You needn't get excited; I don't intend to go gunning for him. I'll stay on my side of the fence, but if he starts to tear loose, I'll sure stop him!"

"I'll go out to the ranch with you," said Randy. "The spring vacation starts next Monday; there's no point in my going back to Boulder for two weeks."

This arrangement had Steve's hearty approval. In fact, he felt relieved by Jeff's frankness. They walked over to the undertaker's and spent an hour there. The town was beginning to fill up already with friends of the family, there to pay their last respects to Carson Gant. The sympathy they expressed to Steve and his brothers was tinged with bitterness against the League. It had no visible effect on him, but he could see it fermenting in Jeff.

"I'll be glad when the services are over," he confided to the sheriff. "You can see what all this talk is doing to him. It's even getting to the kid. If Joe Spangler rides into town before these people leave, there'll be an explosion.

All through the services that afternoon Steve kept bracing himself for the whisper that Spangler had arrived in the Mesa. It would have been like the man to walk into the church or put in an appearance at the cemetery, for, in a way, he was fearless, and as Ducker's chief lieutenant, he had arrogated so much power to himself that he seemed to be past believing he could overstep himself.

Carson Gant was laid to rest, however, without anything occurring to mar the solemnity of the occasion. A little group of cowmen, led by Cass

Southard, sought out the Gants as they were leaving the cemetery with Rita and her father. Cass directed his talk to Jeff.

"It's a little late for us to be talkin' about stickin' together," he said, "but we want you to know, Jeff, that if you need help, we're with you. Yore father jest happened to be the first one around here that the League went after. No tellin' which one of us will be next. We ain't jest sittin' around waitin' to find out; we're lettin' Spangler and Ducker know we're organizin', and that we don't intend to bother with takin' our troubles to court." He glanced apologetically at Steve and old Smoky. "We ain't got no fault to find with yore brand of law, but yore hands are tied, too; you can't do much when the judge and the prosecutor are workin' for the other fellow."

The other ranchers muttered their approval of his remarks.

"If you find you need grub or anythin' till you git straightened out," one said, "send Scotty or Pete over to my place. When you git ready to raise a new house, we'll give you a hand."

Jeff thanked them. He had nothing to say on the short ride back to the Guthries.

"IT'S nice to know your neighbors are sticking with you," Steve observed. "But don't count on them too much. Chris Etten was a good friend of ours, but when the League waved a piece of money under his nose, he took it. Some of these others will do the same."

"I'm playing my own hand," Jeff said flatly. "I don't suppose you're going back to the ranch with Randy and me."

"No, I'll see you tomorrow or the next day. Smoky and I are going to do a little riding."

"You keep in touch with us," Randy told him.

"I'll see that he does," said Rita. "You be careful what you walk into. Somehow, I don't like the idea of your being out there on the Mule Shoe."

The boy smiled. "I know how to take care of myself."

Steve felt a twinge of jealousy sweep through him. A dozen times that afternoon he had caught Rita's eyes fixed on Randy in sober concern. Here at the house, she always seemed to be at his side. Though he tried to dismiss the thought, telling himself it meant nothing at all, he could not escape feeling in some obscure way that they had reached an understanding from which he was being excluded.

Jeff refused Rita's invitation to wait and have a bite to eat. "It's late," he said. "We'll be getting along."

The sheriff and the marshal exchanged a glance, and neither urged them to tarry.

"We'll step back to the barn with you," Guthrie offered. "Randy better take the little dun; she'll carry him nicely."

Steve exchanged a few words with his brothers as they saddled up. The latter raised a hand in a parting salute as they moved toward the road. Rita was on the porch. Randy pulled up for a final word with her. Guthrie saw Steve's attention riveted on them.

"She's worryin' herself needlessly about the boy," Smoky remarked. "They're both young, Steve."

"Yeh," was the marshal's taciturn answer.

He and the sheriff went back down the street a minute later.

"Spangler's keepin' himself posted on what's happenin' here," Smoky observed, as they turned the courthouse corner and headed for his office. "He'll be in this evenin'; he won't wait for me to go lookin' him up to ask what he intends to do about buryin' Ike Slack."

There was a telegram propped up on the sheriff's desk. It was for Gant. He read it hurriedly and tossed it over to the old man.

"'A certain party has rounded up half a dozen gunslicks and got them headed your way. They'll be there on evenin' train. Thought you would like to know. Signed, Charlie.'" Smoky pulled down the corners of

his mouth. "Who's this Charlie?"

"Charlie Pickett, the editor of the Silver City *Star,* and a good friend of mine. Looks like we're going to get some action in a hurry. Ducker evidently figures things look pretty serious."

THE sheriff eased himself into his chair. Steve struck a match and destroyed the message. Both men were silent for a minute or two. Smoky looked up finally from his musing.

"Steve, have we got the authority to turn that bunch back? The peace of the county demands it. If we let Ducker dump a gang of known gunslingers on our doorstep, we're goin' to have war."

"Whether we've got the authority or not won't stop me, and I don't believe it'll stop you." Gant's gray eyes were cold and inscrutable. "That bunch is not getting off of Number 5 if I know it. It won't stop Ducker from trying something else, but it will let him know he hasn't got a walkover here."

Smoky nodded gravely. "No sense tryin' to jug 'em on suspicion; Spangler would have 'em out in a hurry on a habeas corpus." He got up heavily and unlocked a closet door and got a sawed-off shotgun and a small bag of shells. He placed them on his desk. "If we start a play, we'll have to make it stick." The clock on the wall pointed to a few minutes after five. "If that train's on time, she'll pull in at six-ten. . . How we goin' to handle it, Steve?"

"You catch the conductor and order him to hold the train till we tell him to proceed. Charlie didn't mention any names in his wire, but I'll know some of these blacklegs. I'll herd them back into the smoker. You just be ready to back me up."

THEY had not been in the office ten minutes before the tall, square shape of a man well along in his forties, his hair shot with gray, filled the doorway. It was Joe Spangler, cool and formidable. He was acquainted with both men.

"I'm glad I found you here together," he said. "I've only been in the Mesa a few minutes, but I've heard plenty! Are the two of you responsible for the wild talk that's going the rounds?"

"What wild talk?" Smoke inquired casually.

"That Carson Gant was killed and the Mule Shoe house burned on my orders. Cass Southard just stopped me and flung it in my teeth, along with some threats against the League."

"Is that so?" Steve queried. "Does Cass know what he's talking about?"

Spangler stiffened angrily. "Don't give me any of your backhanded slaps! I'm not afraid of any investigation. If you've got anything on me, I'm ready to face it!"

The marshal shook his head. "If we had anything on you, Spangler, you'd be on the inside looking out right now. If there's talk against you, you ought to be able to understand why; you know what your record has been. And there's no secret about how the League operates."

"The League can stand on its own feet and so can I." Spangler's tone was less truculent. He had already learned what he most wanted to know. He eyed the sawed-off shotgun on the desk with an obscure interest. "You can't organize an industry and put it on a paying basis without stepping on someone's toes. But we ain't rubbing a man out just because he won't do business with us, nor burning the roof over his head. I want to tell you right now that Ike Slack got what was coming to him last night. I kicked his partner off the ranch this morning. When a man gets liquored up and pulls a job like that, he can't work for us. The county can dump Slack into a ditch or get rid of the body any way it pleases; the League ain't spending a cent on him. He wasn't on League business when he and Jackson went to the Mule Shoe last night."

"That's interestin'," Smoky muttered. "I'm right glad to hear you say you didn't know anythin' about it."

"So am I," Steve echoed. "But it's a little hard to swallow. My father barely knew those two men. What was their grudge against him?"

"Why, your old man gave them a tongue lashing one morning last week, when he caught them cutting across your upper range," Spangler answered without hesitation. "They had no right to be there, but there was no reason for your father to jump them the way he did. I didn't figure—"

"They didn't know when they went to Mule Shoe last night that the old man was dead—is that what you're trying to tell me, Spangler?"

"Exactly!" was the flinty answer. "I didn't know it; I don't see how they could. None of us had been off the ranch for a couple days."

"That seems to put all three of you in the clear, doesn't it?" Gant's tone was thin and mocking. "What makes you so sure Slack and Jackson didn't leave the ranch the night my father was killed?"

"I was with them all evening! They weren't out of my sight!"

"You're positive about that, eh?" Steve prodded.

"Why—yes," Spangler muttered after a moment's hesitation. Something had rung a danger signal in some remote corner of his brain. His narrowed eyes were slits of suspicion as he stood there. The look Steve and the sheriff exchanged warned him that he was over his head.

"If you're tellin' the truth, Joe, then you must have been at Vollmer's Crick with Slack and Jackson," Smoky observed with chilling inflection.

"You're crazy!" Spangler whipped out furiously. "What do you mean by a crack like that?"

"This," said Steve. He held up his father's watch. "We found it on Slack when we went through his pockets. You wouldn't think a man would be fool enough to carry around a damaging bit of evidence like this. But Ike Slack was never too bright."

Spangler stared at the offending watch for a long moment, his iron will unequal to the task of concealing the sharp stab of fear that was knifing through him.

"I don't believe it!" he snarled. "That watch was planted on Ike!"

"There were witnesses," old Smoky got out heavily. "Slack had the watch on him."

CHAPTER IV

A Hand Is Called

"THAT takes the cake!" Spangler growled. "I was still sitting up, working on the books, when those two birds turned in for the night. I suppose they could have got out of the house after I went to sleep without my knowing it." He shook his head as though honestly bewildered. The doubt he read in Steve and Guthrie's eyes did not fade, however. "Suppose the two of you give me credit for a little sense! If I'd known anything about it, Gant, do you think I'd have been fool enough to let Slack pack your old man's watch around?"

"We're not accusing you of anything," Steve got out quietly. "We know where you're making your headquarters. If we want you, we'll come after you."

"Sure," Spangler agreed. "I'll help you all I can. I didn't have anything against your father personally, though there wasn't any reason for him to buck the League the way he was doing."

"He wouldn't sell out to you—is that what you call bucking the League?"

"Not altogether. He was doing a lot of talking against us. I offered him sixteen thousand for his range and the buildings and told him he could do what he pleased with his stock. That was a fair price."

"Everything considered, you might call it a fair price," Steve admitted. "It was up to him to take it or turn it down."

"Naturally! It doesn't make any particular difference to us whether we get the Mule Shoe or not."

Steve smiled mirthlessly. "I thought it did. Ducker wants to cut off the Red Bluffs. With the range

you've bought in, plus the Mule Shoe, you'll be able to do it. When some of the cowmen around here apply for grazing permits on that public land, they won't be able to get on it without trespassing on League range. That'll stop them; you'll have it to yourselves."

Spangler permitted himself a tight little laugh. "That sounds pretty ambitious. I'm afraid we couldn't get away with it."

"So am I," Steve returned woodenly. "But you'll have a try at it."

Spangler shrugged it off. "What are you going to do with Mule Shoe? My offer still stands, even though the house is gone."

"The ranch belongs to Jeff; he's sticking with it."

The big man in the doorway shook his head commiseratingly. "I'm sorry to hear that. He may change his mind; cutting a trail over Squaw Mountain will be quite a job. If Jeff Gant thinks he can get a better offer out of me by stalling, he's wasting his time!"

Spangler jerked a parting nod and stalked off.

"Guilty beyond reasonable doubt," Smoky declared solemnly. "We can convict that lyin' skunk if we ever get our hands on Yampa Jackson. That's about the only way. Spangler got all bogged down in his own story, but he didn't tell us anythin' we didn't already know."

"He gave us a pretty good idea of what Jeff's got ahead of him," said Steve. "I don't know whether we can put out this fire or not; it's got quite a start. I don't have to tell you that."

SMOKY GUTHRIE nodded understandingly. "Jeff might better take Spangler's sixteen thousand. Pride is one thing, and good hard sense somethin' else. The Mule Shoe ain't worth that figure to anyone but Mart Ducker. Of course, Jeff feels he couldn't hold his head up around here if he did anythin' that looked like backin' down."

"That's only half of it; he wants to square accounts with Spangler. Steve got to his feet. "You can't blame him for that. Suppose we go down to the railroad station."

The sight of the sheriff carrying a sawed-off shotgun over his arm caused people on the street to turn an inquiring glance. When he and the marshal reached the station, only a handful of men were there. Neither offered them any explanation of their presence. The train was marked up on time. Steve walked up to where the baggage truck was waiting; Smoky took up his position inside the station door. It was only a minute or two before Number 5 blew for Broken Mesa. The train ground to a stop, and down the steps of the smoking car came half a dozen men, saddles tossed over their shoulders. A glance was enough to tell Steve who they were. At one time or another, he had personally taken most of them into custody. All had repeatedly run afoul of the law.

"Just a minute, boys," he said, stepping out from behind the truck. "What's your business here?"

They stopped at his challenge, surprise darkening their faces. The last man down from the car shouldered the others aside and confronted Steve. He was a burly individual, lantern jawed, his features so sharply sculptured as to suggest that they might have been hacked out with a cleaver. His name was Buck Hanna.

"What's the idea, Gant?" he demanded truculently. "Ain't this a free country anymore?"

"It is, as far as I'm concerned," Steve returned softly. "I purpose to keep it that way. If you're doing the talking for this bunch, Buck, begin."

Hanna and his companions glared their defiance. But it was an empty gesture; this tall man with the gray eyes had proved to them too often in the past that he could not be bluffed.

"We're workin' for the League," Buck growled, after shifting about uneasily for a moment. "Ducker sent us up from Silver City."

"It's a cinch you're not here to herd sheep," said Steve. "What's the nature of your job?"

"What the hell!" Hanna snapped. "We ain't choosy about that, as long as the pay is good; we'll fill in wherever Spangler tells us!" He whipped

a glance around the platform. "Joe was to meet us. If it's just the same to you, we'll start lookin' for him."

Steve shook his head. "Not today, Buck. You boys are piling back on this train. In my judgment, the situation on this range is such that it won't be helped by the presence of half a dozen gunmen."

Spangler came hurrying around the corner of the station in time to hear the pronouncement.

"What kind of high-handed stuff are you trying to pull?" he burst out angrily. "That tin badge you're wearing, Gant, doesn't give you the right to say who comes and goes!"

"Don't worry about my tin badge," Steve returned calmly. "This bunch isn't getting off here. Is that plain enough?"

"You'll give me a better reason than that!" Spangler rapped. "What have you got against these boys? What have they done?"

Gant gave him a frosty smile. "You *should* ask me, Spangler. Every one of them's got a record. If you and Ducker want to import gunmen, you'll have to hire some hands who aren't so well known at the trade. You back out of this now; I'm not holding this train any longer."

Spangler rocked with rage. He was armed, but he made no move to reach for his gun; he liked t. think he was big enough to hire men to take care of such things. The marshal's attention had focused on Buck Hanna.

"Get moving, Buck," he said.

Hanna stood there undecided, his glance running from Steve to Spangler. The others waited, an alert, suspicious tension gripping them, their thoughts so close to the surface Steve read them without effort. The moment was a familiar one to him. He knew it needed only the movement of a finger, the shifting of an eye, to ignite the fuse that would fill the air with the crash of guns.

Old Smoky had not missed a word nor the lifting of an eyebrow. With the calm deliberateness of a man who knows what he is about, he stepped out of the station and sauntered up to Spangler and Hanna, his shotgun draped carelessly over his arm.

"We won't have any argument about this," he said casually. "The Marshal told you what to do, Buck."

SPANGLER bristled afresh. "So you're in this, too! You ought to have better sense, Guthrie!"

Smoky just nodded at Hanna. Growling to himself, Buck turned back to the smoker and started up the steps. The others followed.

"You get off at Salt Springs!" Spanger called to them. "Wait there till you hear from me!"

Smoky waved to the conductor. With an impatient snort the engine took up its load and Number 5 rolled out of the Mesa.

"The two of you will pay for this nonsense!" Spangler threatened. "I'll get your scalp, Gant, even if I have to go as far as Washington!"

"You won't get any farther than Mart Ducker's office in Silver City," Steve said lightly. "Mart will convince you that any investigation of his Drover's League and this little incident wouldn't be good business. Whether you know it or not, Spangler, your hand has been called. You and Ducker better think up a good excuse for wanting to turn that bunch of gunmen loose on the community."

"We've got property and stock here," the big man retorted savagely. "We've got the right to hire men to protect it."

"That's what the sheriff and I are here for," Steve told him. "If you have any need of protection, call on us and you'll get it."

Spangler started to let out a contemptuous blast, only to check himself. A crafty look dawned in his eyes.

"Maybe that's an idea," he muttered. "If anything comes of threats that are being aired against the League and me, it might be a good idea to call you in. A sheriff and a U. S. marshal ought to be able to see that we get a fair shake." He gave his hat a tug that settled it more firmly on his head and crossed the

platform at a long stride. "The two of you may be hearing from me," he said over his shoulder.

Steve and Smoky stood there till he was gone, their manner serious.

"What's that wolf got on his mind?" the old man jerked out.

"I can make a guess." Steve Gant's tone was harsh and grim.

"Wal?"

"He'll bait Jeff into making a move against him, establish his own innocence with the aid of perjured witnesses, then get Evers to issue a warrant. That'll put the squeeze on us; we'll either have to arrest Jeff or be derelict in our duty. If Spangler can give the impression that I'm lined up against my own brother, he won't only give his frame-up the look of being legal, but it'll knock some of the fight out of Cass Southard and other cowmen west of the Red Bluffs."

"He's a smooth rat!" Smoky Guthrie's weatherbeaten face was rocky. "I reckon he figgers to do even better that than, Steve. He's purty sure we'll try to side-step him. If he can put us in that hole, he'll have enough on us to make us sweat."

THEY walked up the street. News of what had happened at the station ran ahead of them. The nods and shouts of approval that greeted them left no doubt as to what Broken Mesa thought about it.

"We better go over to the house," Smoky said. "Rita will be waitin' supper."

Steve nodded, tight of lip. "When we've had a bite to eat, we'll pull out of town. Spangler will send a man through the hills to Salt Creek tonight; he'll try to sneak Hanna and his friends in before he opens up. They'll most likely come by way of Ute Crossing."

Guthrie nodded. "That's where I'd look for 'em. We can be at the Crossin' a little after midnight if we take the road north. I know we ought to get word to Jeff, but it'll cost us a couple of hours if we go around by the Mule Shoe. Why not write him a letter. Rita can take it out in the morning'."

"No reason to write a letter; I'll just tell her what I want him to know."

During supper Steve gave Rita his instructions for his brother.

"Make him agree to do nothing, no matter what Spangler starts," he said for the third time, as they were getting up from the table. "Smoky and I will cut across the valley and see Jeff on the way down. You can tell him that."

Rita assured him she understood. "I'll get an early start in the morning. I don't suppose it would do any good to remind the two of you to be careful. I never heard of anything good coming out of Ute Crossing. That dive Dumont runs there has been a rustler and blackleg hangout for years."

"We'll be all right," Smoky said, unconcerned. "It's Jeff we're worryin' about. You run over to the Cyphers and tell Chuck to take charge of things till I get back. We'll be on our way.

Charlie Cypher was his deputy. A horse had rolled over on him early that month and he had been confined to his bed ever since. Rita reminded her father of it.

"I don't believe he's in any shape to take over for you," she said. Smoky brushed it aside.

"He's strong enough to sit around the office a few hours. That's all I'm askin' him to do." Behind his gruffness there was a deep affection for this daughter of his. He wrapped an arm around her in a bearish hug and strode out to his horse. Steve hung back a moment. He gave Rita a reassuring smile.

"This isn't going to be so tough. Your father and I have handled a lot worse a good many times."

"I know," she murmured, "but he isn't as young as he used to be. I'm glad you're going to be with him. You take care of yourself, Steve," she added.

Something in the way she said it made his heart beat faster. The impulse to take her in his arms and crush her to him held him a prisoner

and left him without words. Smoky stuck his head in the door.

"Wal, you comin'?"

It broke the spell. They mounted quickly and rode away. Steve glanced back and saw Rita standing on the porch, waving farewell. He raised his hand to his hat and settled down to the long ride they had ahead of them.

CHAPTER V

The Wrong Side of the Fence

BROKEN MESA dropped behind them. To the north, the Organ Mountains raised their formidable bulk. The sun was gone, but in the afterglow the rimrocks were splashed with vermillion and violet. Ten thousand times, it seemed to Steve Gant, he had watched the play of light on those high ramparts at the end of day, the vermillion deepening to dark rose and the violet to graying purple as the shadows crept up out of the valley to the highest peak. Seeing that panorama again brought back old memories. Unconsciously, he began to lag behind. Several times he had to use his spurs to catch up.

It was true that Smoky Guthrie was no longer young, but the pace he set reminded Gant of their old days together. Three hours of hard riding took them out of the broad valley. The road began to lift into the hills. By midnight, they were through Spanish Pass. This was the way Yampa Jackson had fled. It was in their minds, as they pulled up to rest their horses.

"Hindsight is no sight at all," Guthrie muttered. "We might have known that if Jackson started to run it would be in this direction. If Cass saw him just after daylight, he must have hit the Crossin' about ten o'clock. It's a cinch he stopped there for a drink or two. I reckon we can drag that much out of Nap Dumont."

"It'll give us something to talk about when we get there," said Steve. "We'll let Nap think that's why we're showing up in the middle of the night."

Dumont's sun-warped, tumbledown back-country saloon and the equally down-at-the-heel building next door, in which he dispensed sugar, salt, coffee and a few other staples, whenever he happened to have them, was the size of Ute Crossing. Nap Dumont, lazy, greasy, disreputable, had been there a long time. Smoky had threatened to close him up on a dozen different occasions. The only reason he hadn't was because when the pressure was put on Nap, he would talk to save his own skin.

Though it was late when Steve and the sheriff came in sight of the Crossing, a light burned in the saloon. They tethered their broncs at the rail without drawing anyone to the door. When they walked in, they found Nap asleep in a chair, his snoring rattling the empty bottle on the table before him. Smoky shook him awake. Nap reared up, sputtering.

"Bagosh, you wanta break my neck?" he growled, blinking at the two men. A grin spread over his broad oily countenance as he recognized the sheriff and Steve. "*Sacre!* It's you, Smoky! And the marshal!" He got to his feet, brushing the hair out of his eyes. "Come over to the bar. I set 'em up for you!"

Smoky shook his head. "None of your home-made rot gut for me at this time of the night, Nap. Sit down; we want to talk to you."

"Sure," Dumont agreed, thoroughly awake now and cagy. "Who you after, Smoky?"

"Nap—how long ago did Yampa Jackson leave here?"

The Frenchman shrugged. "I don't see him for long time."

"Stop your lyin'," the sheriff told him. "Yampa was here yesterday."

"He may be here right now!" Steve interjected suddenly. "I'll have a look upstairs."

DUMONT did not protest. Gant went through the rooms above. One bed had been slept in recently, but the blankets were cold. There was no evidence that Yampa Jackson had occupied it.

"No one up there now," Steve announced on returning to the bar-

room, "but there was earlier in the evening. Who used that bed, Nap?"

"By Gar, I don't know his name, Steve. He is stranger to me. He come 'bout sundown and slap ten-dollar gold piece on the bar and tell me to get him supper and take care of his bronc. He sleep for couple hours, he say. I call him ten o'clock and he go."

"Owlhoot?" Smoky muttered.

"Mebbe. That bronc is wearin' brand I never see before."

"How sure are you it wasn't one of Joe Spangler's hired hands?" Steve demanded, far from convinced that Dumont was telling them the truth.

"Non!" The Frenchman shook his head positively. "He ride in from the east. He's no mutton tender!" His dark eyes flamed behind their bags of fat. "That sheep crowd get no favors from me, Steve. I'm no fool; I know my beezness go to hell if the League turn dis country into sheep range."

It was an angle that his visitors had not considered. Gant could see that Guthrie was impressed. For himself, he was skeptical.

"We're giving you a chance to prove where you stand," he said. "When was Jackson here?"

"This mornin'; he rode in about ten o'clock. Yampa is not work for the League any more. Dat's what he say."

"Yeh? Just what did he have to say, Nap?"

"He's have big fight with Spangler, he tell me. He get in some trouble. Joe don't stick by him; he give him fifty dollar and tell him to get out. Yampa is only here 'bout ten minute."

Steve compared it with what he knew and decided that Dumont was telling the truth. He caught Smoky's eye and was sure the sheriff felt the same way about it.

"We hadn't expected you to be very helpful, Nap; maybe the sheriff and I had you wrong. But you always liked an easy dollar."

Dumont gave him a side-long glance. "What's behind dat talk, Steve?"

"We figured Spangler had a finger on you. And yet, you tell us a straight story about Jackson. Why don't you come through with the rest of it? Who did Spangler send over the trail to Salt Springs tonight?"

"Dat's crazy!" the Frenchman growled. "If Spangler have someone on de Salt Spring trail tonight, he's not go through Ute Crossin'." When he found Steve gazing at him unconvinced, he appealed to Smoky to bear him out. "I be damn fool if I don't lie to you sometime. But I speak de truth when I say nobody go on Salt Spring tonight." He gave a start of surprise as it finally dawned on him that he didn't know why they were so interested. "Why you fella ask so many question 'bout de Spring?"

"We're expectin' company from that direction—undesirable company, Nap," the sheriff answered. "I'm goin't to put our broncs in your barn. We're goin' to sit around here the rest of the night. You can do the same, or turn in, as you please."

Steve stepped outside with him. They walked their horses to the barn.

"If Nap's tellin' us the truth—and I suspect he is—it makes our hunch look purty weak," Guthrie observed. "Spangler may have figgered we'd be showin' up here."

"Maybe," Steve agreed, "or he might be giving himself a little more time than we thought. Right or wrong, we'll stick it out now."

Dumont sat up with them for an hour. At Smoky's urging, he boiled a pot of coffee. Soon after, he made a bed for himself in a couple chairs and was quickly and noisily asleep.

The night wore on, and no one came. Just before dawn, Smoky dozed off. Steve let him sleep. It was after seven when the sheriff jerked awake. He glanced at his watch, grumbling to himself. "Looks like they ain't comin' through!"

"It's getting late," Gant admitted. "They may have had some trouble getting horses." He kicked Dumont in the shins. "You're blowing like a steamboat, Nap! See what you can do about some breakfast."

THEY were eating, when two riders crossed the creek. Smoky

slammed his knife and fork on the table and started to leap to his feet. His excitement faded as quickly as it had blazed up.

"That's Dick Richards, the U. S. ranger and the young fellow he's got helpin' him!" he growled in his disappointment.

"Looks like they're coming back from Salt Springs," Steve said. "If they don't stop, we'll hail them."

The two men were passing without turning in, when the sheriff called from the door.

"Well!" Richards answered, turning that way. "You've picked a nice quiet spot for yourself, Smoky," he declared, with a dry chuckle. "You should have been in Salt Springs last night."

"Yeh? This is Steve Gant, the federal marshal. What was so excitin' in the Springs last night?"

Richards ignored the question for a moment and grinned at Steve. "We heard considerable about you in the last twelve hours, Marshal. We were in the Springs when Number 5 got there. A few minutes after that bunch of gunmen landed there, the story was all over town about how the two of you had run them out of Broken Mesa. The conductor told the agent, and he got the tale circulating."

"Dick, I'm waitin' to have you answer me!" Smoky jerked out impatiently. "What happened?"

"Why, that bunch had only been there a short while when Yampa Jackson rides in. They knew him, and took it for granted Spangler had sent him up to guide them back through the hills. He certainly made them think that was why he was there. He started back with them, all right. We pulled out about the same time and saw the whole thing. When Yampa got them in Singer Canyon, he turns around and leaves them. He passed us, riding at a gallop. We didn't know what was up till a gun commenced cracking on the rim. He'd doubled back and got ahead of them. When he had them in that narrow canyon, he just shot the pants off of them. He killed Indian Joe Gains as dead as he'll ever be and blasted Gus Danner and Whitey Fenn so seriously that we wondered if they were still alive when we got them back to a doctor. . . . What got into Jackson, anyhow? They were all birds of a feather."

"I don't know, and I don't care!" Smoky rapped. "When that breed of skunks gets to blazin' away at one another, it's the best thing could happen to this country! What I want to know is—what became of the rest of 'em?"

"Why, they headed this way." The question seemed to surprise the ranger. "They must have passed here about daylight."

"No, they couldn't have got by without our seeing them," Steve contradicted. He was furious, and he did not attempt to conceal the fact.

"They must have lost the trail, then—"

"I doubt it!" Guthrie growled. "They swung around the Crossin' and gave us the slip! Buck Hanna's been in this country before; he'd remember somethin' about it! . . . Much obliged, Dick! We won't hold you up any longer."

DUMONT had heard every word. When Smoky and Steve turned back to the barroom, he was waiting for them, his sinister eyes bright with satisfaction. "I tol' you Yampa have fight with Spangler! Dat's why he bust them fella! I guess you see I give it to you straight."

"Yeh, you told us the truth," Steve acknowledged. He pulled out a five-dollar piece and tossed it to him. "You keep the change, Nap. Maybe we can do you a favor before we're through."

"Don't take that for permission to put your rope on some man's beef," the sheriff remarked pointedly. "If you hear anythin' you figger we ought to know, git word to us."

"You goin' on de Spring?"

"No, we're lookin' up Joe Spangler—and the sooner, the better!"

Dumont helped them saddle up. He had not taken offense at being reminded of his rustling habits. To prove it, he called out, as the sheriff and Steve were riding away: "Don't

worry about me swingin' a loop, Smoky! Bagosh, he's gettin' so there's no cow left around here for a man to put a rope on!"

Guthrie and the marshal took it for granted that Buck Hanna and his two companions, who had survived the ambush in Singer Canyon, had long since made their way to the old Etten place and joined Spangler.

"Lettin' them slip through our fingers like that just about burns me to a frazzle!" Smoky rapped, as they headed back to Spanish Pass. "I'm gittin' madder by the minute! You know we started a play last night when we put them fellows back on the train that we got to finish, no matter what comes of it!"

"That's the way I feel," said Steve. "The only thing we can do now is to lock them up. On the strength of that trouble last night, we ought to be able to hold them a few days."

THEY raced through the Pass and were dropping down into the valley, when Steve called Smoky's attention to a rider flashing toward them, the horse held at a driving gallop.

"That may be some word coming for us!" he called uneasily.

Smoky jerked his head in a terse nod and said nothing. In a few minutes, they found something familiar about the oncoming rider. Gant's mouth tightened; he knew he wasn't mistaken.

"It's Rita!" he cried. "She wouldn't be coming for us if something hadn't gone wrong!"

The sheriff's answer was to rake his bronc with the spurs and dash ahead. Rita came on. When she met them, she pulled her dripping horse to a slithering stop.

"It's happened!" she got out excitedly. "Jeff killed Joe Spangler this morning!"

Steve rocked with the shock of her news, but he found his tongue before Smoky could bark a question. "Did Jeff go after him, or did Spangler come at Jeff?"

Rita paused to catch her breath. "I don't know what you call it, Steve. Jeff went over the mountain to the upper range after breakfast. He found about thirty yards of his fence down. It had been cut. Several hundred sheep had moved in; some of his stock had drifted through the break and were spread over the Etten range. There wasn't a herder, or anyone, in sight, he claims. He started to turn the sheep back. He had got some of them across the line, when Spangler shows up. He had some of those men you put back on the train with him. You can see it was all a plot to embroil Jeff."

"Go on with your story!" Smoky snapped. "Where did this argument take place? Was it on the Mule Shoe?"

"No, it was on the other side of the fence—"

"Good Lord!" her father groaned. He whipped around on Steve. 'They'll use that against him, Steve, no matter what the circumstances! Ducker will go all out to do it! He's got witnesses who'll lie to his order!"

"Yeh," Steve muttered woodenly. "Let Rita finish."

"Jeff accused them of cutting his wire. Spangler ordered his thugs to throw him off the place. Jeff swears he didn't reach for his gun until they started to draw on him. Even then, he didn't lose his head; he managed to bluff them to it, somehow, and held them covered, without firing a shot."

"Go on! Go on!" Smoky urged impatiently.

"Father, don't bark at me like that," Rita protested wearily. "I'm doing the best I can; this means as much to me as it does to you." She moistened her lips before she continued. "Jeff told them to throw their guns away. They dropped them, and he made them move off. But Spangler was armed. The treacherous snake turned his back and managed to get his revolver out of the holster unnoticed. When his hand flashed up with the gun, Jeff saw it, and fired. If ever a man shot in self-defense, he did!"

STEVE and Guthrie were silent, their faces tense and enormously sober.

"That ain't the way Buck Hanna and his pals will tell it!" Smoky growled. "They'll swear it was an unprovoked attack on Spangler! They'll lie themselves black in the face claimin' he didn't draw!"

Steve nodded grimly. "Jeff won't have a chance in a courtroom. Spangler was Ducker's right-hand man; the League will spend a fortune to get a conviction. It's been Ducker's boast that it isn't safe to oppose him; he knows he'll have to prove it now or the League is finished. . . Rita, is Jeff at the house?"

"Yes, Randy is there with him. Scotty and Pete went up to repair the fence. I don't want you to blame him for this. It wasn't his fault, Steve. He tried to keep his promise to you."

"I'm not blaming him; he couldn't have done anything else. If your father and I hadn't been so cocksure of ourselves last night, we could have stopped this. But it's too late to waste any breath on that. What time was it when the shooting occurred?"

"About seven o'clock."

"Then they haven't had time to file any charges against Jeff." He turned to the sheriff. "I want you to give me a little time with him alone. You can ride back with Rita, and take it easy."

Smoky gazed at him from under his hooded brows, his leathery face grimmer than Steve Gant had ever seen it. "I know what's on your mind," he said. "It won't help matters, Steve. If he runs, he won't have anythin' ahead of him but outlawry. I've known other good men who took that step; they were hunted till the day they died."

"Good heavens, man, you don't have to remind me of that!" Steve got out desperately. "It's all true, and I know it as well as you. But even that is better than being railroaded to the gallows for killing a skunk in self-defense—a skunk who murdered your father! . . . You give me an hour! I'll be at the house when you get there!"

CHAPTER VI

Ahead of the Law

GANT was almost in sight of the Mule Shoe house, when a mounted man rode out of the brush. It was young Randy. He had a rifle over his saddle horn. He motioned for Steve to pull up.

"I didn't know who was coming till you got around that bend," he explained. "Jeff is throwing a few things together; he knows he's got to get away. I posted myself down here to make sure no one stops him, and that includes you, Steve. You're a law officer; if you figure it's your duty to arrest him, this is as far as you're going."

The marshal realized that his brother meant every word of it. Without anger, he said: "You ought to have better sense, Randy. Jeff says he shot in self-defense. There's no charge against him yet that I know of. As a matter of fact, it would be a job for the sheriff of this county to take him into custody if a charge or suspicion warranted it. That's why I came alone. Smoky agreed to give us an hour. Don't let's waste any of it here trading words."

Jeff appeared in the bunkhouse door when they rode into the yard. Steve flung himself from his horse.

"We want to talk fast," he said. "Rita told me what happened; I want you to go over it, Jeff. Give me all the details."

Jeff Gant's story added little or nothing to what Rita Guthrie had related. "I couldn't do any different, Steve; it was either Spangler or me. They planned the whole thing. When they saw me cross the line, they knew they had me. That's where I made my mistake. I just want you to know I didn't go out to do this; I gave you my word, and I meant to keep it."

On the surface, he tried to appear unexcited, but it was only a mask for the somber emotions coursing through him.

"Smoky and I didn't help you any," Steve said self-accusingly. "Where do you figure you'll head for, Jeff?"

"Wait a second!" Randy interjected. "Won't it be better if you don't know where Jeff's going? In a few hours, he's going to be a wanted man."

"You're right, kid. I just wanted him to be sure he realizes he won't be safe in this state. Don't try to come back, Jeff, till Mart Ducker comes to the end of his rope. You watch the Denver papers; Randy and I will run an ad in the Help Wanted columns when we want to get word to you. . . Have you any cash?"

"Only a few dollars."

"I've got a couple hundred on me," Steve told him. He pulled out his wallet. "Here it is; you take it. If you're picked up, you'll need a lot more than that. The sensible thing to do is to sell this place and have the cash ready for you. Randy can draw a paper that will be legal."

Jeff stiffened. "Ducker kills the old man, burns us out and drives me into outlawry. Does that mean he's going to get the Mule Shoe after all he's done to us?"

"I think Cass Southard will buy it; he's got the money, and he knows if the League gets this ranch, things will be tough for him. The price won't be sixteen thousand, but it'll give us enough to pay off the mortgage and have a chunk left for you whenever you need it. I'd prefer to have you put the property in Randy's name. You can understand why."

"You fix it up," Jeff told the boy. "If Cass buys the place, it'll mean a job for Scotty and Pete. I wish you'd make sure of that."

RANDY found paper and pen and drew a document that put the Mule Shoe in his name. Jeff and Steve signed it.

"I'll never touch a penny of it," he said soberly. "When I'm admitted to the bar, I'm coming back to the Mesa; I know I can make my own way. I'll devote my life, if necessary, to getting justice for you, Jeff, and for father. The law is never better than the men who administer it. I may be young and inexperienced, but I won't let that stop me; I'll smash these crooked judges and prosecutors with the help of the honest men in this county."

He spoke with the fire and spirit of a crusader, not merely as an apostle of vengeance. Jeff turned away, a lump in his throat. Steve was equally moved. Once again, he was reminded that this young brother of his had grown up.

"To hear you talk like that makes me proud of you," he said with feeling. "I had some plans for you as a lawyer; I thought I might get you a better start than trying to make your way in a busted cow-town. But you're right; your place is here. You and I have a debt to square. That comes first."

He told them about the affair at Salt Springs. Jeff's reaction was characteristic.

"I only hope I catch up with Yampa Jackson!" he exclaimed. "It won't take me long to settle our score against him!"

"Don't be foolish!" Steve warned. "Yampa Jackson dead isn't worth a thing to us; close his mouth forever, and you'll cost us the only real chance we've got of ever bringing Mart Ducker to justice, as well as clearing you."

"Steve's right," Randy declared. "If we can get Jackson to confirm Slack's confession that Ducker hired them to kill Father, we'll be able to bring the whole rotten mess crashing down on Ducker's head and riddle the trumped-up story that'll be used against you. Leave it to Steve to dig Yampa Jackson out of his hole. There isn't a chance in a thousand that you'll ever meet up with him. If you should, don't do anything that will make it impossible for me to put him on the witness stand."

They discussed their plans for some minutes. Jeff had the few things he was taking with him ready to be placed on his saddle. His horse was saddled and standing at the rack. Steve glanced at his watch.

"Time for me to be going?" Jeff inquired soberly.

"Yeh," was the grim answer.

They walked out to the rack together. Jeff glanced at his brothers and quickly pulled his eyes away. "I

guess this is so-long," he muttered, his throat tight. "I'll keep off the road till I'm past Smoky and Rita. Don't say anything now; I couldn't stand it."

He got away quickly. Steve and his brother watched him till he disappeared over a hill. Randy's lip was white between his teeth.

"This isn't the end, kid," Steve declared stonily. "For you and me, it's just the beginning."

It wasn't long before Smoky and Rita rode into the yard. Rita's face had a tense, drawn look; her father's face was hard and rocky.

"We alone?" he asked.

"Yeh," Steve replied. "There was nothing he had to add to what Rita told us; it happened just as she said. You better step down and get out of the sun; it's cool under the trees."

Randy took their horses and led them over to the rack. There was a spring under the trees. The run-off from it kept a patch of grass green and vigorous. Rita helped herself to a dipperful of water and sat down on the ground.

"You and Steve take the bench, Father; I could just curl up here and sleep forever."

"WHEN you've rested a little, I'm going to ask Randy to take you home," Steve told her. "I want him to stay in town for a day or two. Smoky and I have some work to do."

"What about the ranch?" Randy asked.

"We'll see Scotty and Pete." Steve turned to Guthrie. "Before we do anything else, we're going over to Southard's place. There's just a chance that we may be able to clear up a thing or two. I want to find out why Buck Hanna and his pals walked wide of the Crossing last night. Dumont didn't double-cross us; and yet, Hanna knew we were there. There was only one way he could have been tipped off."

"Naturally!" the sheriff grunted. "Nothin' mysterious about that. Spangler started a messenger on his way to the Springs, and the gent saw us when we was ridin' into the Crossin'."

Steve nodded. "That part of it doesn't puzzle me; I just want to nail this down: Spangler didn't have anyone he could send after he lost Slack and Yampa; these Mexicans the League brings in don't mix up in the fighting. Most of them can't speak more than a word or two of English."

"What's your point?" Smoky snapped.

"That Spangler was his own messenger. He got out from town ahead of us and started north at once; he saw us heading for Ute Crossing. When we stabled our broncs, he knew we were set there for the night."

"Good Lord, Steve, what are you drivin' at?" Guthrie burst out. "What difference does it make whether Spangler went himself or sent somebody?"

"It may make considerable difference," was the phlegmatic answer. "Consider the timing and see what it tells us. We know Spangler was killed about seven o'clock, at a point at least two miles above his headquarters. According to the facts the ranger gave us, Hanna and his companions must have passed the Crossing not earlier than daylight. Now they couldn't have reached the Etten house, got Spangler and returned to the upper range by seven."

"No," Smoky acknowledged, as light began to break on him. "Spangler must have come down from the north with 'em. Even so, they would have had to cross Southard's range and the Mule Shoe to reach that fence in time to cut it, drive stock through and hide out for Jeff to show up by anythin' like seven o'clock. If we could prove it, it would go a long way toward showin' that that trouble was deliberate and premeditated. . . You figgerin' Cass or one of his crew might have seen 'em?"

"It's only a hope," Steve told him. "If it turns out to be the case, it'll do more than shed a little light on what Spangler fixed up for Jeff."

"What do you mean?" Randy put in. He had been listening to every word.

"Why, just that Buck Hanna and

the rest of them will tell a story that will be a mile wide of the truth all along the line; they'll never admit that they came down with Spangler and cooked up the whole thing. If we can put the lie on that part of their testimony, it can't help but affect the credibility of everything they say. . . If you're ready, Smoky, we'll pull away." Steve glanced at Rita. "You and Randy take your time; you'll be in town long before we get there."

"You're going after Hanna and those other men?" she asked, not trying to conceal her anxiety.

"We're going to bring them in," Steve said simply. "It'll be done easier now than after Ducker shows up to whip them into line."

It was a stiff climb over Squaw Mountain to the upper range. The marshal led the way. When they rode out of the scrub timber, they saw Scotty and Pete coming across the high range in their direction.

"They've evidently got the wire up," said Steve. "Let's ride out and meet them."

SCOTTY and Pete were glum-looking figures as they pulled up.

"Everythin' quiet up here now," Scotty told them. "A couple of them Mex herders shoved our stuff back on our range, and we told them to come across and git their damned sheep off the place. We went to work on the fence, then. Had to put in a few new posts."

"What did they do with Spangler?" Steve inquired.

"They musta taken the body down to the house before we got here," Pete answered. "Scotty and me didn't see nothin' of it. Where's Jeff?"

Steve told them what had occurred down below, and that the Mule Shoe now stood in Randy's name. Scotty and the faithful Pete shook their heads tragically.

"We'll stick as long as you and Randy feel you can go on," the former said. "But it shore looks like the finish, Steve. Ducker will find some way of comin' at us again."

"Not right away, I reckon," Smoky spoke up. "He's goin' to have some trouble digestin' what he's already bitten off!"

Steve gave the two men no instructions; he knew they were capable and self-reliant. "It may be a day or two before we see you, but you'll be all right. If you want to get in touch with us, one of you come to town."

They parted a few minutes later, and Steve and Guthrie turned to the northeast in the direction of Cass Southard's Slash S house. The Slash S was an old brand, and Cass had made it the biggest cow outfit of the dozen or more strung along the western fringe of the Red Bluffs. In the long ago, he had ranged his cattle on the government reserve without any thought of paying grazing fees. Barbed wire and regulations he had once never dreamed of had changed that. He had cursed the change and pronounced it a calamity that would send him to the poorhouse. But he had prospered more than ever; his cattle were on government range every summer. He needed that grass to survive, and he was in no doubt as to Mart Ducker's plans to cut him and his neighbors off from it.

When Steve and the sheriff rode in, they found a little knot of men gathered in the yard. Cass was one of them.

"One of the boys just brought in the news," he explained to Steve. "He got it from Scotty and Pete. It looks awful bad! Apparently, there ain't nothin' that bunch of wolves won't do!" He jerked his head in the direction of the house. "Come on in; we'll sit down and talk it over."

"We can't spare the time," Steve told him. "Jeff has pulled out for parts unknown. It was the best thing he could do; he couldn't get a fair trial. The Mule Shoe stands in Randy's name now. He'll have to let it go, Cass. If you want it, figure out what it's worth to you. You can take a couple days to think about it. Smoky and I didn't come up to talk about that, however. We believe Spangler and his gunslingers crossed your range this morning. Did any of your crew see them?"

"Not that I heard of. Dusty went

out early to make a swing around our north line; he might have seen 'em. It's gittin' on towards noon; he ought to be back soon. You better wait."

They were debating the matter when a horseman topped a rise to the north of the house and Cass identified him as Dusty Clemmons.

"Lin!" Southard called to one of his men. "Ride down to the corrals and tell Dusty to git up here at once!"

CLEMMONS came loping up a few minutes later. He did not appear surprised to find the marshal and sheriff there. A shrewd look settled on his homely face. "I kinda figgered yuh might be showin' up," he said. "I wish the three of yuh had been with me this mornin'."

"Out with it!" Cash growled. "What is it?"

"I saw Joe Spangler and three tough-lookin' gents cuttin' across our range. I—"

"You're positive about that?" Steve interjected.

"Absolutely! They were comin' down that shallow draw just south of Ute Crossin'. They didn't see me, but I shore got a good look at them. I tried to circle around to cut them off. Four to one didn't look like good odds to me, unless I could git the jump on 'em. Time I got in position, they was out of sight." He mistook the tenseness of their faces for disbelief in his story. "I'll face Spangler! I'd like to see him deny it!"

"Hunh!" Smoky snorted. "Joe Spangler ain't goin' to deny nothin'; he's dead."

A recital of what had taken place on the Mule Shoe line that morning made Dusty realize the importance of his story. It failed, however, to make him change it.

"I'll swear to it under oath!" he said positively.

"Okay, Dusty," said Steve. "We'll let Cass know when we need you."

Southard walked part way across the yard with Gant and the sheriff, turning the conversation to the future of the Mule Shoe. He was familiar with the figure the League had offered for it.

"I couldn't match that," he said frankly. "In fact, Steve, it's only the upper range that would interest me. Mebbe Thad Taylor would be glad to buy the rest of it; it would be handy to him. It ain't practical to work stock over that mountain. I'll speak to Thad, if you say so. Between the two of us, we might make a deal with Randy. I shore don't want Ducker to grab that high range!"

Steve told him to talk things over with Taylor. "We'll get together," he predicted. "We'll just about have to, Cass."

Southard nodded. "You and Smoky goin' to need any help with that bunch? Me and the boys will ride over with you, if you say so."

"We can handle it," Guthrie snapped. "I only hope we find 'em at home!" He jerked his head at Steve. "Let's go!"

They rode swiftly and were soon out of sight of the house. There was no conversation between them until they reached Mule Shoe's northern line. Steve lowered a strand of wire so they could get through. In the near distance, cattle ceased grazing to gaze at them for a moment and then moved farther away.

"The old man used to say this piece of grass was the best you could find west of the Divide," he remarked. "He worked hard to nail it down."

"I know it," Guthrie muttered. "It's a shame to turn it over to sheep!"

"They're not here yet!" Gant's shoulders were a stiff, straight line. "The time will come when Ducker will regret the day he decided to grab it!"

CHAPTER VII

Stick to Your Guns

THE SOUTH fork of Spit Cat Creek came down out of the Red Bluffs across what had been the Box E in Chris Etten's day. It worked close to the house and then

swung off to the Mule Shoe line. Using the willows that marked its course to screen them, Steve and the sheriff crossed the fence and followed the creek until they were within several hundred yards of their destination.

"Let's pull up here a minute or two," Steve suggested. "We're close enough to see what goes on at the house."

They had been watching only a few minutes, when two men came up from the barn and stepped into the kitchen. Gant identified them as Buck Hanna and Frank Zuber.

"They're all there," Smoky growled. "If one of them had gone to town, it would have been Hanna. They sent in one of the Mexicans with a wire for Ducker; they didn't have the guts to show their faces in the Mesa."

It was Steve's opinion that the three men were like sailors on a rudderless ship without someone to tell them what to do, and for that reason, doubly dangerous, since no consideration for what Ducker might feel was best for his plans would have any weight with them.

"They're undoubtedly going in to eat," he told Smoky. "With a little luck, we ought to be able to walk in on them before they know we're here."

"We better have some luck on our side," was the grim answer. "If we don't, we're likely to have to eat some lead when we show our faces."

They left their horses in the brush and moved down the creek far enough so that their approach to the house was toward the front. Once they were in the open, every step was fraught with danger. Their shoulders hunched unconsciously, as though better to meet the blast that might come any second. Even when they came within easy range, and they failed to draw a shot, their wariness did not abate a hair.

They reached the front door, however, with their presence apparently undiscovered. It was only a few feet across the uncovered porch. The door, itself, stood ajar. Steve indicated it with a stiff little jerk of his head.

"Let's try it," he muttered. "I'll go in first. Have your gun ready."

The old boards cracked as they put foot on them. They pushed in and were half-way across the front room when they heard a chair scrape in the kitchen.

"What was that?" a gruff voice demanded suspiciously.

It was Buck Hanna.

Steve filled the kitchen doorway a moment later. Hanna was on his feet, ready to come around the table, where Zuber and the third man, Chalk Wiley, were seated.

"The three of you freeze where you are," the marshal ordered quietly. Smoky crowded in. Steve told him to take their guns. The sheriff ran a cold eye over them.

"When I told you gents there wasn't any room in this county for you, I meant it!" he rasped. "You bat an eye now and I'll bust all three of you!"

"You old butter-ball, you better go slow with us!" Hanna raged. "We ain't done nuthin'! Ducker'll see that we git our rights!"

"SHUT UP!" the sheriff growled. He disarmed them easily enough, but as he passed behind Zuber, the man made a running leap for the open window. This time Steve caught him with a long whistling right that dropped him to the floor. It took the fight out of Zuber, and when he crawled to his feet, he backed into a corner with Hanna and Wiley. Smoky broke their guns, removed the cartridges, and tossed the weapons through the window.

"Consider yourselves under arrest," he barked.

"Yeh?" Hanna flung back contemptuously. "What's the charge?"

"Assault with a deadly weapon and suspicion of murder," Steve cut in. "You set out from Salt Springs last night with Gus Danner, Whitey Fenn and Indian Joe Gains. Gains was killed; Fenn and Danner may die."

"Are you crazy, Gant?" Buck's eyes were murderous. "We was bush-

whacked! Yampa Jackson dropped those boys!"

Steve smiled incredulously. "Your friend Jackson? You left the Springs with him. You wouldn't try to tell me one man got the jump on six of you, would you, Hanna?"

"That's exactly what I'm tellin' you! That double-crossin' skunk pulled away from us just before we got to Singer Canyon, climbed up on the rim and started blastin'. Me and these two boys would have got it, too, if we hadn't run!"

Gant gave it a scornful laugh. "Maybe you can make a jury believe that. . . A gang of hired gunmen mowed down by one man!" His tone was a sarcastic lash. "Have you any witnesses?"

Steve hung on Hanna's answer, afraid lest he had seen Richards and the assistant ranger. To his relief, Buck said:

"Zuber and Chalk was right there! That's witnesses enough for me!"

"Witnesses, my foot! Smoky scoffed. "You're all principals in this crime, one as guilty as the other!"

The three men had arranged a satisfactory story in regard to the killing of Spangler, but to be charged with a crime of which, for once in their misspent lives they were wholly innocent, so bewildered them that they could only stare at the sheriff and Gant in helpless astonishment.

"Who brought you down last night?" Steve demanded.

"We got down by ourselves!" Buck snarled. "I been here before; I know the way!"

"You even knew enough to walk wide of the Crossing, didn't you? Why don't you tell the truth? We know Spangler met you."

"That's a lie!" Zuber roared. "Joe was right here in this room when we showed up!" He turned to Hanna and Wiley for confirmation.

"All right," said Steve, "if that's your story, stick to it. What did you do with Spangler's body?"

"It's in the barn," Hanna answered.

"Did you notify my office of the killin'?" Guthrie demanded sharply.

"No—"

"But you notified Mart Ducker! Wal, he'll find you birds in the cooler when he shows up! And you'll stay there! Git out to your broncs now; we're takin' you in!"

Not a word had been said about the slaying of Joe Spangler. The very absence of the expected questions further shook Hanna's confidence and had the same affect on his dull-witted companions.

"If yo're interested in witnesses," Buck growled, "why don't you open up about that brother of yours, Gant?"

"You couldn't tell us anything we don't know," Steve said easily. "We've got the evidence we need. Get moving, now."

Out in the yard Smoky found an opportunity for a word with him. "So far, so good," he muttered uneasily. "But how long is our bluff goin' to stand up?"

"I don't know." Steve's tone had never been more sober. "Win or lose, we'll stick to our guns."

Herding the three men ahead of them, they began the long ride into Broken Mesa. It gave Steve time to reflect on the fate that had overtaken his father and Jeff; Carson Gant's troubles were over, Jeff's only beginning. He realized that circumstances could so shape themselves that he, in his official capacity, would find himself forced to hunt down his own brother. He tried in vain to dismiss the thought and in the bitterness that flooded his mind, it occurred to him that it would be a simple matter to snuff out the worthless lives of Hanna and the other two and save Jeff. He and Smoky could claim the men had tried to escape. It would be a flimsy excuse, but no one could give it the lie. "No," he brooded, "there must be a better way than that!"

THE arrival of the sheriff and marshal with their prisoners caused a stir as they rode down the Mesa's main street and turned toward the jail.

Chuck Cypher, the deputy sheriff, was waiting for them. The jail occupied the rear of the one-story stone building in which the office was housed. Chuck went back with them

and helped them put the three men in the cells. It was only a matter of several minutes after he turned the key on them that Steve realized he and Smoky held a losing hand.

With Chuck, they had returned to the office. Almost the first thing the deputy told them was that Jesse Evers, the district attorney, had gone to Salt Springs on the morning train to investigate the gun battle in Singer Canyon.

"He came stompin' in here a few minutes after the news reached town that Gains had been killed and a couple others shot up," Chuch continued. "He let out a howl when he found you weren't around."

Smoky snorted fiercely. "What did you tell him?"

"That you and the marshal were up the county on business. I wasn't givin' that little squirt any satisfaction! Reckon he'll be back this evenin'."

"Got awful busy, didn't he?" Guthrie rapped. He sat down heavily. "A bunch of blacklegs blow one another down and Evers has to travel across the county to investigate; but when an honest and respected man like Carse Gant gits killed, the dirty weasel don't even stir out of his office to do anythin' about it!" There was a hard-bitten look on his face as he glanced at the marshal. "You know where this is goin' to leave us."

Steve nodded gravely. "That bunch back in the cells will be on the street in a few hours; you won't be able to hold them. It's a cinch Dick Richards and the assistant ranger had plenty to say when they got back to the Springs with Finn and Danner. Evers will get the whole story. He was bound to, of course, but I figured it might be a few days. . . . Chuck, what's the feeling in town about what happened up on the Mule Shoe?"

"The Mesa's boilin'! Everybody knows about it. Randy and the girl got in an hour ago; the little they had to say has shore stirred things up. Half a dozen men have been here expressin' their sympathy for Jeff; they all seem to feel he was wise to run, that he couldn't expect to git a fair shake from Evers and Ogilvie." Through the window, he saw a rotund figure approaching. "Here comes Doc Ranscamp again."

The coroner edged in a moment later and nodded sympathetically at Steve. "Is it a fact," he inquired, "that Joe Spangler has been killed?"

Smoky nodded. "You'll find the body in the barn out there. Steve and I just got in; I was goin' to drop around and notify you, Doc."

Ranscamp pursed his lips reflectively. "This is the fourth killing within a week. Where is it going to end?"

"I don't know," the sheriff muttered. "Maybe Mart Ducker could give you the answer."

"By the way, Doc," Steve spoke up, "how does it come that Evers didn't take you up to the Springs with him?"

"Why?" Ranscamp repeated disgustedly. "He never got in touch with me! I didn't even know there was anything wrong at Salt Springs till I heard it here on the street. He's been up there four, five hours, and I still haven't a word from him. If he wires now, he can wait; I'm going out to the Box E. I'll take the undertaker along with me and have the body brought in. The inquest will be held here in the Mesa; I understand you've got the witnesses locked up."

"For the minute, I got 'em behind the bars, Doc. You can call 'em witnesses if you want to; I got another name for 'em!"

A TRAIN schedule was tacked on the wall. Steve studied it with interest after Ranscamp left. He turned from it to find Guthrie gazing at him with slitted eyes.

"Things are comin' to a head about six o'clock," Smoky got out crossly. "Is that what you've discovered?"

Steve nodded. "Ducker will be here a few minutes after Evers comes down from the north. It gives us a few hours to get ready for them. I want you to pick out someone you can trust and send him out to get Dusty Clemmons. I'll send a letter out to Southard, too; I want him to round up as many men as he can and

be here before six. As long as we're going up against a brace game, we'll try some strong-arm methods of our own."

"Good heavens, Steve!" Smoky ripped out excitedly. "If we bring a mob like that into the Mesa, there's no tellin' what'll happen!"

"That's exactly my point," was the marshal's sober answer. "Maybe it'll make Evers and the judge and Mart Ducker go slow."

Smoky shook his head dubiously. "I don't like to do it, with feelin' runnin' so high. On the other hand, if we can't do somethin' to throw the fear of God into Ducker, there won't be no stoppin' this lawlessness. . . You write your message to Cass; I'll get Cole Iverson to take it out. Chuck, do you want to go down the street and tell Cole I want to see him? You needn't tell him why."

Steve had his brief note finished before Cypher returned with Iverson, a grizzled range veteran who once had been Cass Southard's foreman.

"I want you to get this letter to Southard," Gant told him. "How long is it going to take you to get there?"

"Wal, ninety minutes is my record," Iverson said, with a grin.

"Shake a leg, Cole," Steve said. "It's important."

Smoky slapped on his hat and announced that he was going to look up something to eat. "No use seein' Ogilvie," he declared contemptuously. "He won't do anythin' till Evers gits back and they have a chance to git their heads together. If they know Ducker is due to show up, they'll wait for him to call the play. If you feel like eatin', come along. We'll try that short-order place across from the post office."

Steve agreed to accompany him, but not without voicing his belief that they should see the judge.

"Why?" Guthrie snapped. "We won't git anywhere."

"I don't suppose we will, but it might take some of the bite out of him if we let him know where we stand."

Smoky was full of objections and refused to be persuaded.

"I ain't wastin' breath on Ogilvie!" he declared stubbornly. "If you want to see him this afternoon, that's your business."

In passing the courthouse, they came face to face with the judge, returning from his noon-time dinner and an hour's nap at home. His crafty eyes stabbed at them from behind gold-rimmed glasses.

"I want a word with you, Guthrie," he declared pompously, as Smoky would have brushed past. He had a curt nod for Gant. "You may consider that how you conduct the business of the sheriff's office is your own concern, but it strikes me it's about time somebody reminded you that you were elected to enforce the law, not to make it."

"Look here, Jube, you're barkin' up the wrong tree when you try to talk down to me!" Smoky retorted, boiling over in an instant. "I'm responsible to the voters of this county for my acts, not to you!"

Ogilvie's florid face took on a purplish tinge. "There's authority in this state to restrain you or any other peace officer, federal or otherwise, if occasion demands. I've always backed you up, even when I knew you were exceeding the powers of your office. But you have gone too far. I believe I have been correctly informed as to what occurred at the railroad station last evening. You didn't have any right under the law to order those men back on that train. And that goes for you, Gant. If they were disturbing the peace, or you had any reason to believe they were wanted for the commission of a crime, it was your duty to arrest them; but you had no authority for the action you took."

"I think that's debatable, Judge," Steve replied thinly. "Every one of that bunch was a known violator of the law, with a record a yard long. Speaking for myself, I had every reason to believe the interest of the community was best served in ordering them out of town. I'm quite willing to take full responsibility for what occurred. You may not care to admit it, but you know as well as I do why that bunch of gunmen was being brought in. Whenever I see a gang of hired killers being turned

loose on law-abiding citizens, I figure it's my duty to stop them. If you think otherwise, you're free to do what you please about it."

"THAT goes double for me!" Smoky blazed. "I take it you've kept yourself up-to-date on what's happened since last evenin'! Four killin's in less than a week! That ought to give you somethin' to think about! The butter you've been puttin' on your bread may be gettin' a little slippery!"

Ogilvie's face swelled apoplectically. This was as near as anyone had come to telling him he had permitted himself to become the tool of the Drovers' league.

"My record is as clean as a whistle!" he boomed, after sputtering incoherently for a moment. "What are you trying to infer, Guthrie?"

"Infer, nothin'!" Smoky shot back. "I'm tellin' you to your teeth that the road you're takin' will never lead you to Congress!" The man's political ambitions were well known, and it was something of an open secret that he had hitched his wagon to the Drovers' League on the promise of its support in the next campaign.

"A scurrilous remark like that is just about what I'd expect from you!" the judge cried, shaking with wrath. "The best people in this county are behind me!"

"Who do you call the best people—yourself, Mart Ducker and Evers?" Guthrie demanded with infuriating sarcasm.

Their loud voices had begun to attract attention. Across the street, four or five men had stopped to listen. It was not a conversation that Ogilvie cared to have repeated over town.

"You haven't heard the last of this," he threatened, holding himself in with a supreme effort, but none the less venomous. His enraged eyes fastened on Steve. "It's been almost a week since your father was killed. Instead of doing anything constructive that might have led to the solving of that crime, you and Guthrie have been satisfied to inflame public opinion against the League. I promise you, you will be called on to explain why you permitted your brother to flee the country."

"He shot Joe Spangler in self-defense," Steve declared calmly. "I'm not aware that any charge has been made against Jeff."

"No, he didn't wait for that! If he's innocent, why did he run?"

"Perhaps he didn't like the brand of justice that's being handed out to those who oppose Mart Ducker. When Evers questions the three men we've got locked up, the sheriff and I are going to insist on sitting in. We've got some evidence of our own to present before any warrants are issued."

"I'll act on the information the prosecutor hands up to me!" Ogilvie snapped. "That's my legal procedure, and I intend to follow it!"

Steve answered with a grim nod. "If you want to pass the buck to Evers, that's all right with me. But don't try to count us out, Judge."

Ogilvie greeted it with an angry snort and started up the courthouse steps muttering something about defying anyone to coerce him. Guthrie and Steve continued on their way.

"We made him squirm a little," Smoky muttered savagely. "That's all the satisfaction we got out of that. Ducker'll snap the whip and Ogilvie will perform like a trained seal!"

"It doesn't want to be too raw," Steve said darkly.

CHAPTER VIII

Shoot Square—Or Else!

RITA WAS on the porch with Randy when she saw Steve and her father coming up the street. She went to the gate to meet them.

"We knew you were back," she said, searching their faces. The deep lines of weariness under her father's eyes did not escape her. "It took you a long time. Did you run into trouble?"

"Not to speak of," Smoky told her. "Looks like things may come to a head this evenin'. I'm goin' stretch out in the swing and take a little cat

nap. If you've got somethin' cold to drink in the ice-box, trot it out; we stopped in at the restaurant for a bite to eat; the place was hot as an oven and the piece of beef we had was so tough you couldn't git a tooth through it."

"Serves you right for not coming home," Rita pretended to scold. "I had a nice salad waiting for you. Sit down, Steve, and make yourself comfortable. I'll get a pitcher of iced tea."

Smoky was sound asleep in the porch-swing by the time she got back.

"Don't wake him," Steve advised. "We can move down to the other end of the porch. I'll talk to the two of you a few minutes and then I'm going to get a little sleep myself. Your father is still a hard man to keep up with, Rita. If we sit here, we won't disturb him."

"I wish he had gone to bed," she said. "He looks terribly tired. . . How did things go, Steve?"

"As well as we could expect. We saw Cass and then went to the Box E. We brought Hanna and the other two in with us and locked them up."

Under their prompting, he gave them a full account of the situation, including the encounter with Jube Ogilvie. At the end, Randy did not hesitate to question the wisdom of asking Southard to round up every cowman he could and bring them into town by six o'clock.

"You may have a riot on your hands," he declared. "It doesn't take much to turn a crowd of sane men into a howling, unreasoning mob. They'll ride into town hating the League and all it stands for. You won't have to whip them up to anything; they know Ducker is out to break them. If some hot-head supplies the spark, they're apt to string Ducker up. It would finish you if that happened and it got noised around that you had had a hand in instigating it."

Steve readily admitted they were playing with dynamite.

"If it wasn't dangerous there would be no sense in holding it over Ducker's head," he said. "It's a threat, and Smoky and I will keep it to that and nothing more. I'm going to go in and lie down for a couple hours. Be sure to call me at five."

It seemed to him he had been asleep only a few minutes, when Randy shook him awake.

"Don't tell me it's five o'clock already," he said.

"Just about," Randy assured him. "I thought you might like to hop into the tub. There's half a hundred men in town already. Southard certainly did a thorough job. He seems to have his whole crew with him."

STEVE began to pull off his clothes for a quick bath. "Have you been away from the house?"

"Yes, I was down the street a bit ago. I was stopped a dozen times. Some of the men were strangers to me, but they said they were not only standing by Jeff, but they'll back up anything you and Smoky start."

"That's about what I expected," said Steve. "But just remember that I want you to keep out of this; you and Rita stick close to the house till it's over. Is Smoky awake?"

"He's out in the barn, feeding his horses."

At five-thirty, Guthrie and the marshal were on the street. Smoky's eyes brightened at sight of the horses tethered at the racks. "It's like old times," he muttered. "She ain't a sheep town yet, Steve! Not by a long ways!"

For the moment, it was the true Broken Mesa that was reminiscent of happier days, when it had been all cow-town.

A crowd blocked the sidewalk in front of the Star Hotel. Every chair on the porch was filled. Big Thad Taylor got up and pushed through to speak to Steve.

"There's cool heads enough here to keep things in line," he declared, "but though our intentions are peaceful—up to a certan point—we don't propose to stand for any more funny business over there." He jerked his head in the direction of the courthouse. "We held a meetin' a few minutes ago and formed an organization; the boys elected me to head it.

Southard and Jim Emory are the other officers."

Steve and the sheriff voiced their approval of the step that had been taken. Without saying so, both realized that it made the assembly a lawful one.

"Where is Cass?" Smoky asked.

"He's waitin' for you at your office."

At that time of the day, the courthouse was usually deserted. Men were strung out in front of it, however, their attention fixed on the windows of Ogilvie's chambers. The men had a word of encouragement for Guthrie and the marshal.

"The ole buzzard is still up there," a Slash S puncher told Gant. "Reckon he knows we're here for a showdown! Exercisin' his jawbone won't save his hide!"

Steve and Smoky turned the corner. Both realized that if the situation blew up in their faces it would be someone like the man who had just spoken who would touch it off.

They found Southard and Dusty Clemmons waiting for them.

"Tex Rollins just spoke to us," Steve said at once. "You want to keep your eye on him, Cass; he's had a few drinks and he's talking a little wild. We don't want any violence. If a hand is laid on Ducker, or Evers and Ogilvie, it'll defeat the very thing we're trying to accomplish. Either this show of strength is going to be enough in itself to force a square deal out of that gang, or we're licked."

"That's my understandin'," Southard declared. "You needn't worry about Tex; I'll see that he cools off. Do you want to go over anythin' with Dusty?"

"No, all I want him to do is to repeat what he told us this morning, when Evers shows up."

SMOKY had taken a look out in back. He closed the connecting door when he returned to the office. "Those birds know somethin' is up. They're lookin' a little white around the gills."

Gant went to the street door when he heard the train from the north roll in. A few minutes later, he caught hoots of derision from the direction of the lower main street of the Mesa.

"Suppose we step down to the corner," he said to Smoky and Southard. "You sit here with Chuck, Dusty."

They had no sooner reached the courthouse corner than they saw Evers coming up from the station, his brief case under his arm. Though he was as fat as a porcupine, he was hurrying along, looking neither to right nor left, a set look on his perspiring face. The remarks being tossed at him made him stretch his short legs.

He glared at Smoky and Steve as he passed. "This is a fine condition of affairs!" he whipped out. "Is this how you do your duty, Guthrie?"

"Free speech is still one of the inalienable rights, Jesse," Smoky answered with blighting impudence.

Evers didn't pause to hear more. With his thin lips tightly locked, he ran up the courthouse steps and disappeared within. The crowd howled with satisfaction. Tex Rollins ran up the steps in an excellent imitation of the prosecutor and thumbed his nose at the door. Again the crowd howled.

"I'll git Tex outa here!" Cass growled.

The marshal spoke to Guthrie and started down the street to the station. He was posted there when the evening train from Silver City arrived. There were very few passengers for the Mesa. Steve had begun to think he had guessed wrong about Ducker, when the porter on the Pullman in the rear, put down his wooden step and Ducker and Sam White, the League's attorney, got off.

The tension in the air rolled up against Ducker the moment he set foot on the ground. His muscular body tensed and he sniffed the currents of hostility directed at him like a bird-dog scenting game.

The score or more of men watching him were all townfolk, but their enmity was as bitter as that of the rangemen Cass Southard had brought into the Mesa. They didn't give an

inch as Ducker and his lawyer crossed the station platform.

The two men were within a few feet of the marshal before they saw him. Ducker's icy blue eyes remained inscrutable. He jerked a nod of recognition. Steve returned it just as sparingly. He and this iron-jawed man with the brick-red hair were far from being strangers. He was acquainted with Sam White, too. The latter gave him an anxious glance and seemed relieved to find him there. Ducker looked around when Steve fell in behind them.

"What's the idea?" he demanded.

"You haven't any friends here," was the phlegmatic answer. "I don't want this situation to get out of control."

Ducker dismissed it with a surly laugh, but his neck muscles began to stand out in knots as he caught a glimpse of the crowd gathered around the courthouse. White said something to the red-haired man that Steve did not catch. Mart's reply was characteristically uncompromising.

"To hell with this rabble! No mob is intimidating me, Sam! I've been howled at before!"

AT the corner, his cold blue eyes drilled into Smoky.

"You ain't fooling no one, Guthrie! If you and Gant didn't have a finger in this business, you'd break it up in a hurry! The two of you ought to know better than to try such nonsense on me; I don't scare worth a damn!"

"Neither do I, Mart," Smoky flung back casually. "I got over that a long time ago."

The marshal went as far as the courthouse steps with the two men. Someone fired a rock that crashed through a window at the side of the door. White ducked inside, but Ducker whirled around and stood there defiantly. The angry cry of the onlookers rose in a sullen roar.

"The gall of the man—hoppin' off the train and marchin' into the courthouse without makin' any bones about it! I tell you it stinks, Steve!" Smoky was so incensed that his voice boomed incautiously. "What more evidence do you want that he owns them two skunks?"

The marshal withheld his answer and, with the sheriff and Cass, returned to the office. There, they sat themselves down to wait for Evers to appear to question Hanna, Wiley and Zuber, or order them brought up to his office in the courhouse. They had been waiting more than thirty minutes, when Ranscamp pushed in. The crowd, sensing that action would come here, had gathered outside in such numbers that it blocked the sidewalk and street.

"If you'll go back with me, I'll fire a few questions at the men you've got locked up, and that'll end my part of it," the coroner said to Smoky. "I couldn't shake a word out of those Mexicans."

Gant took Ranscamp aside and spoke to him for a minute. He knew the man was honest; he had a good practice in the Mesa and the surrounding country; the three hundred dollars a year the county paid him for his services as coroner had never compensated him for the demands his duties made on his time. Furthermore, his sympathies did not lie with the Drovers' League or Jesse Evers.

"Sure," he agreed to Steve's suggeation that the inquest be held in connection with the prosecutor's questioning of the three men. "Evers won't like it, but that's neither here nor there as far as I'm concerned. How long have you been waiting for him?"

"About half an hour."

It was after seven before Evers stepped out of the rear of the courthouse and hurried down a path to the side door of the sheriff's office. The crowd saw him and let him feel its hatred.

"Clear these people out of here and lock the door," he snapped at Guthrie. He tried not to appear nervous, but his agitation had dampened his round face.

"Who is it you want put out?" Guthrie inquired. "Cass and Dusty have some testimony to give; the rest of us are county or federal officers."

Evers glared at Southard and Dusty. "Am I to understand you were witnesses to the shooting of Joe Spangler?"

"Just a second," said Steve. "Your purpose is to determine responsibility for that shooting, I take it. If that's the case, the events leading up to it may shed some light on what happened. You may choose to disregard the evidence we have to offer, but you'll listen to it. Make no mistake about that."

"Your threats are wasted on me!" the district attorney retorted. "I'm not interested in what led to the shooting at this time! I'm not trying this case now!" He whipped around on Southard and Clemmons. "If you have anything to say, let's hear it!"

"It's customary to question the eyewitnesses first," Steve reminded him.

"Bring them in, sheriff," Ranscamp spoke up. "The prosecutor is without authority to question anyone until I've declared Spangler legally dead and given my opinion as to how he met his death."

EVERS tried to slay him with a glance. "Your inquest is only a formality! You could have handled the matter hours ago!"

"It's a little formality we'll observe this time, if for no other reason than just to keep the record straight." Ranscamp nodded at Smoky. "Get them in here."

Evers ground his teeth and sputtered.

"That's bad for your blood pressure," said Doc. He was enjoying himself and not trying to conceal the fact. Steve blessed him for the stand he was taking.

The sheriff brought Hanna, Wiley and Zuber in, handcuffed together. Outside, men with their faces pressed to the windows, passed the news on to the others. The noise of the crowd swelled to a menacing roar. Hanna and his pals quailed before its grim challenge. The glance they flicked at Evers was a bid for his protection. But Jesse's pudgy face had paled and he was busy trying to dissemble his own alarm. He had been given his instructions, and he was there to carry them out. He disagreed violently, however, with Ducker's opinion that this angry crowd was only a bluff. For months, he had gone ahead confidently, knowing he had the League behind him. Now, somehow, that seemed a rather frail reed on which to lean.

"This demonstration is an outrage!" he charged, fastening his eyes on Steve. "I'll hold you and Guthrie responsible for it! That meeting at the hotel to organize a stock association was only a cover-up for your conniving! Filling up this town with your friends won't stop me from doing my duty!"

"That'll be fine," Steve returned thinly, "if you'll just remember that your duty is to the men and women of this county, not to Mart Ducker."

CHAPTER IX

Wanted for Murder

RANSCAMP seated himself at Guthrie's desk. Steve had never regarded him as a particularly shrewd man, but he was forced to change his mind about that in the next few minutes, for even Doc's perfunctory questions were incisive enough to start Hanna to floundering.

"What's your name?" he began.

"Buck Hanna."

"Your true name," Doc demanded sharply.

"Robert Joseph Hanna."

"Where do you live?"

Buck shifted around uneasily and finally stated that Silver City was his home town.

"You're a little uncertain about that, aren't you?" Ranscamp's tone was sarcastic. Evers came to Hanna's aid.

"Where he hails from is irrelevant! Why don't you confine your questions to this case?"

Doc gave him a frosty smile. "I'm not as well acquainted with Mr. Hanna as you appear to be, Jesse. Where he comes from is unimportant, but I must have something for the record. I understand he's a widely travelled

gentleman. If Silver City is satisfactory to him, it's quite all right with me." He left the prosecutor choking with rage and directed his attention to Buck once more. "What is your occupation, Mr. Hanna?"

Buck, hired gunman, twice convicted rustler and all-around range thug, stood there in helpless confusion, licking his lips as he tried to find a satisfactory answer.

"You're employed by the Drovers' League?" the coroner inquired helpfully.

"Yeh!"

"You're a herder—a sheepherder?"

"No—I'm a sort of handy-man."

Chuck Cypher tittered and old Smoky exploded in a loud guffaw.

"This is a farce!" Evers cried. "You're deliberately trying to make this man ridiculous! You're not after information regarding the crime!"

"Suppose you permit Doc to proceed in his own way," Steve suggested. "It's the answers, not the questions that are ridiculous. If Hanna would just admit that he's a thug and gunman, with half a dozen convictions against himself, and that his home is where the pickings are best, we could get on with this business."

Evers started a sizzling reply, but something in the marshal's gray eyes stopped him. Ranscamp went on with his questioning.

"You were present this morning when Joe Spangler was shot?"

"Yeh! All three of us was there!"

"You witnessed the shooting?"

"Sure! We saw the whole thing!"

"What was the hour?"

"Seven o'clock."

"All right, tell me what occurred —from the beginning."

Hanna seemed to find something suspicious in the question. His eyes narrowed and he gave Doc a hard glance. "What do you mean, the beginnin'?"

"From the time you left the house," Ranscamp snapped. "You did leave the house together—you three men and Spangler—didn't you?"

"Yeh—"

"And you had a special reason for going up to that high range at that time of the morning?"

"Yeh—"

"What was it?"

AGAIN Evers protested that the coroner was conducting an examination of the witness instead of permitting him to tell his story. Doc ignored the interruption and waited for Buck's answer. The latter had had time enough to manufacture a plausible lie.

"Sheep had been turned on to that new range the day before; Joe wanted to see how the stuff was doing."

Zuber and Chalk Wiley nodded their corroboration.

"Go on," Ranscamp prodded.

"We found a piece of the fence down. Some of Gant's cows had come through. About twenty head. A bunch of sheep had moved through the break and was spread out on his range. We'd only been there a minute when Jeff Gant shows up. He's killin' mad and accuses Spangler of cuttin' the fence."

It was quiet now in the office, every eye on Hanna. Outside, the crowd had gained reinforcements and was keeping itself informed of what went on beyond the door.

Doc's pencil moved across the sheet of paper on which he was writing. Steve saw Buck flick a glance at Evers and caught the man's faint nod of approval.

"It appears that livestock is changing its habits," Ranscamp remarked dryly, without looking up from his writing. "To my personal knowledge, it's been a proven fact for forty years that cattle won't go on graze that sheep have tainted. I'd say it would take two or three men to drive as many as twenty cows through a break in a fence if sheep were on the other side."

"And they'd have a time of it!" Cass Southard growled. "One man couldn't do it by himself! Hanna admits Jeff was alone! That's enough in itself to tell you who did the dirty work!"

Doc nodded. "That's something I'm sure the prosecutor will look into if this case ever comes to trial. "He put down his pencil. "Continue, Hanna."

"I said Jeff Gant was alone up there when we saw him." Buck came

back belligerently. "Who he had with him before we showed up, I don't know! He climbed down from his bronc and came bustin' across the line about seventy-five yards to where we was standin'. He shoves a gun at us. . . There wasn't no argument; Gant jest lets Joe have it."

Steve and Smoky exchanged a glance; Hanna's tale was just about what they had expected. Evers made no effort to conceal his satisfaction with it. Ranscamp got the same story from Zuber and Wiley.

"What do you find?" the district attorney demanded, popping out of his chair.

"That Joseph Spangler came to his death as the result of a gun-shot wound, allegedly inflicted by Jefferson Gant. The friends or relatives of the deceased have my permission to remove the body from this county or inter it, unless you order it held for a post mortem." It was the usual perfunctory statement.

"You could have got to that in two minutes!" Evers said bitingly.

"Perhaps," Ranscamp returned coolly. "As long as you were present, I thought I'd bring out one or two points for your benefit. I haven't the legal mind you so often claim you possess, but I reckon it's as plain to you as it is to me that the story these men tell is a tissue of lies. They're professional gunmen, and Spangler wasn't any tenderfoot, yet with time to spare, they permitted Jeff Gant to walk up to the mand never touched a finger to their guns."

"I'm not interested in your deductions, Ranscamp! If you'll let me sit down there, I'll end this nonsense in a hurry." Evers turned to the sheriff. "Before we go any further, Guthrie, on what charge are you holding these men?"

"On suspicion of bein' involved in the killin' of Indian Joe Gains, south of Salt Springs last night, and bein' accessories before the fact in the death of Spangler." No one knew better than he what Evers' answer would be.

"Of all the absurd things I ever heard of, holding these men in connection with that Salt Springs affair is it!" Jesse got out contemptuously. "My investigation shows they were ambushed by Yampa Jackson and were caught so treacherously that they were helpless to fire a shot in their own defense. I double checked the facts. Dick Richards, the ranger, and young Rogers saw the whole thing. Ranscamp will have to go up to the Springs tomorrow to issue a certificate on Gains. You can save yourself the trip; Yampa Jackson is your man. I've got a shut and closed case against him!"

"WERE you able to establish why Jackson turned his guns on that bunch of blacklegs?" the marshal inquired.

"I certainly was!" Evers shouted, hotly resentful of Steve's patronizing tone. "For your benefit, I don't mind telling you I also expect to establish that the only reason these three men are being held is a cheap attempt on your part and Guthrie's to save face after running them out of town last night. I'll have more to say about that before I'm finished. . . Hanna, have you anything to add to the story you just told the coroner?"

"No, nothin' to add or change."

"How about you, Zuber?"

He got the same answer from him and, next, from Chalk Wiley. Evers gave a satisfied nod. His round little eyes were suddenly bright and venomous.

"If anyone has any evidence to refute the statement of these men, let's hear it," he snapped.

Steve realized the matter had already been decided; that Jeff was to be charged with killing Spangler and that it was only a waste of breath to say anything further. He got some satisfaction from telling Evers so.

"It won't make any difference," he continued, "but you're going to listen to this. On the word of three men who, on their record, wouldn't have any standing in an honest court, you're going to railroad Jeff if you possibly can. From start to finish, their story is a lie. When Jeff showed up, they started away and tried to sneak a shot at him. Jeff had to kill him to protect himself."

"That's his story," Evers remarked scornfully. "But he chose to put himself beyond the law."

"Don't call the game you're playing the law!" Steve rapped. "Cass—did you send a man out early this morning to ride your north line?"

"Yeh, Dusty was the man," Southard jerked out, surprised at the suddenness of the question.

"Dusty, did you see anything out of the ordinary this morning?" Gant drove on.

"I saw Joe Spangler and these three men comin' down from Ute Crossin' and sneakin' across our range toward the Mule Shoe."

"What time would you say that was?"

"A little after six."

Steve turned to the prosecutor. "There you are! Do you need any more to tear Hanna's story to tatters? He said it was seven o'clock when he got up to the fence. You know that country well enough, Evers, to realize a man can't get from Southard's north line to Chris Etten's house and back up into the hills in an hour." He whipped around on Buck. "Hanna, you lied when you said you left the Box E house with Spangler this morning. He picked you up below Singer Canyon last night and all four of you came down together."

"Yeh, we came down together," Buck admitted, "but we went up to the fence as I said. I ain't sure about the time. We crossed Southard's range. It wasn't any six o'clock, though!"

"That's enough," Evers declared. "These matters can be threshed out at the trial. If the defense can break down Hanna's story, that'll be its privilege."

"Why, you miserable little wart, you know there'll never be a trial!" Steve rifled back. "A trial isn't what Ducker wants! He wants the threat of it hanging over Jeff so he can make an outlaw of him!"

Jesse got to his feet trembling with anger and indignation. "I won't dignify such wild talk with an answer!" he fumed. "But I assure you there'll be a trial if your brother is ever returned to the custody of the court! I'm asking for a warrant charging him with murder! As for these men, Guthrie, I order you to release them at once; there isn't a scratch of evidence to justify holding them."

"Why, they're material witnesses if they ain't nothin' else," Smoky protested. "Do you mean to tell me you're goin' to let them go on their own recognizance? For their own safety, they might better stay where they are!"

"Evers doesn't seem to think so," Steve put in thinly. "If he wants to shoulder the responsibility of releasing them, don't waste your breath arguing with him; let'm go."

"Okay, Chuck; take the cuffs off 'em!" Guthrie told Cypher. "It ain't our funeral!"

CHAPTER X

The Tables Are Turned

WORD of what had happened went winging over the crowd and through the deepening dusk of evening, a frenzied cry of protest filled the air.

"Shove that bunch out here, Guthrie!" someone yelled. "We'll give 'em a short ride and a fast one!" Jesse Evers is the rat we want!" another cried. "Get the dirty son out here! We'll take care of him!"

Unconsciously, Buck Hanna ran a free hand around the collar of his shirt. It was a tell-tale indication of the pattern of his thoughts. Now that he was free to go, he obviously had no heart for it. Chalk Wiley sighed heavily, and kuber's eyes were pin points of alarm and distrust.

The prosecutor sucked in his breath nervously. He knew he had gone too far to back down now. Fighting the panic that was knifing through him, he glared at Smoky and Steve and threatened to wire the governor for a company of militia.

"The two of you have the authority to deputize all the men you need to disperse this mob! If you don't act at once, I'll have you removed from office!"

"Why don't you use your brains instead of your jaw?" Guthrie demand-

ed defiantly. "All those men want is a square deal! There's half a dozen of us here who'll see that nobody lays a hand on you. We'll walk back to the courthouse whenever you're ready. . . What about these gents?" Smoky indicated Hanna and the other two.

"Were you armed when you were brought in?" Evers asked Hanna.

"No, Guthrie tossed our guns away at the ranch." Buck's voice was a hoarse croak. "It's murder to send us out into that crowd!"

"You come with me," Jesse snapped. "I'll see that you have a chance to protect yourselves!"

"You wilful little fool!" Doc Ranscamp burst out. "If you want bloodshed here, putting a gun in their fists is the way to do it!"

Evers refused to listen. "Get those people away from the side door, Guthrie. And see that you keep them back!"

Smoky stepped out and Steve followed him. The crowd had anticipated that the side door would be used. A solid wall of cowpunchers, stockmen and local citizens stood there. The sheriff started to herd them back.

"They're comin' out," he told them. "I want you boys to move out to the street and stay there. When I tell you I don't want no rough stuff here, I mean it!"

Big Thad Taylor began elbowing men aside until he made his way up to Guthrie and the marshal.

"Just hold up a minute before you give any orders," he said soberly. "Steve, I told the two of you that our intentions were peaceful. That still goes, but before we pull away, we want to know how things stand."

"Evers is asking for a warrant on Jeff charging him with murder," the marshal answered. "He's ordered Hanna, Wiley and Zuber released."

"That's what I understood," Thad observed. "If there was any doubt about Ducker corrupting some of the officials of this county, it's gone! We can't stop them from framin' Jeff, but I promise you we're not lettin' them turn those gunmen loose on us. We're givin' them just one hour to get out of town. I want Jesse Evers to understand that."

"I reckon he heard you," Smoky growled; "the door's open! Now will you move back?"

"All right," Taylor told him. "You've got our ultimatum."

HE GOT the crowd back without much difficulty. Evers popped out of the door with Hanna and the other two climbing over each other's heels in their anxiety to keep up with him. It was only several hundred feet to the rear door of the courthouse. The crowd shouted its hostility and kept it up until they disappeared within.

Smoky glanced at Steve. "This thing ain't over; Taylor means what he said."

"Yeh." Gant turned into the office and spoke to Southard. "You better get out there and talk to Thad. I'm not afraid he'll lose his head, but these Mesa men may take things into their own hands. There's enough of them to do it."

Dusty went along with Southard. Chuck Cypher began to light the lamps.

"I guess I better get out there, too," Doc Ranscamp remarked. "I hate to see night come; things looks bad to me. You know what the thing boils down to, Steve."

"I think so. Mart doesn't give a hoot about those three men; he can hire as many more as he needs. But keeping them here represents his right to do as he pleases."

Doc nodded. "They're scared. Hanna will run if he gets the chance. I reckon, they all will."

"They won't go if Ducker can prevent them. He'll get them out of town, if he can, and head them for the Box E."

Ranscamp got to his feet shaking his head gravely. "They'll never make it, Steve. And I'm not sure it won't be best if they don't. I've always been a great upholder of the law, but this is one time when a little range justice might do more for the peace and safety of this part of Colorado than all the writs, warrants and peace officers you could crowd into it."

Smoky and Steve sat alone with Cypher after Doc left. The crowd had moved around the corner to the front of the courthouse, with a man or two posted to watch the rear doors.

"Doc has it about right," Guthrie said out of a heavy silence. "It'll be up to us to save the hides of those skunks, and that'll only make things worse instead of better. It'll just be pullin' the chestnuts out of the fire for Ducker; the League will take over this range and run things to suit itself, same as it's done in other places."

Gant knew it was true. He had met defeat before but he had never found his hands so completely tied. The bitterness that was in him was reflected in the hard set of his mouth. The lamp suspended from the ceiling threw harsh shadows across his face.

Cypher had put a brick against the side door to hold it open, so they could catch what went on in front of the courthouse. All they could do was to wait and speculate on what the next move would be.

"Somethin' happenin' out there," Guthrie exclaimed fifteen minutes later, as the crowd began to whoop it up again. "Chuck—you run across the yard and see what it is!"

Cypher was gone only a minute or two.

"It's Ogilvie—he's come out on the balcony over the front door and is talking to the crowd!"

"What's he sayin?" Smoky growled.

"He's trying to tell them to have confidence in him; that there's no reason for them to stage a demonstration like this. He says he's been on the bench twelve years and never favored one man or organization over another." Chuck shrugged disgustedly. "Just a lot of wind, if you ask me. He ain't getting far."

Steve jumped up without warning. "Smoky, it's a trick! Ogilvie's got too wide a yellow streak in him to pull anything like this if Ducker hadn't got some game up his sleeve and ordered that weasel to get out there on the balcony!"

He stepped through the door and glanced at the rear of the courthouse. The two men who had been posted there were not to be seen. He surmised that the excitement out in front had drawn them in that direction. It was enough to convince him that his prediction was correct. A moment later, he saw the door through which Evers had conducted Buck and the others open cautiously. A man stuck his head out. It was Hanna. He no sooner made sure the coast was clear, than Chalk Wiley and Zuber joined him and they hurried down the alley.

A THOUHT flashed across Steve Gant's mind that galvanized him into action. "Come on, Smoky! This may be our chance to turn the tables on Ducker! If those birds are anxious to get shut of this country, we'll help 'em!"

As soon as they were beyond the rear of the courthouse they broke into a run. The three men heard them coming. A cross street opened ahead of them. Rather than risk it, they darted in between two of the sheds that lined the alley, only to find escape cut off by a ten-foot wall of chicken wire. They were armed, and when Hanna leaped out, he had a gun in his fist.

"Don't shoot, you idiot!" Steve barked. "A shot will bring a hundred men pouring into this alley! I'm not interested in getting you out of the Mesa, but if you've had enough of this country, the sheriff and I will give you a chance to make a run for Wyoming. Make up your mind in a hurry!"

Wiley didn't hesitate a second. "I never want to see this lousy country again!" he growled. "To hell with Ducker, if we can git away!"

"That's what I say!" Zuber agreed. "That goes for you, too, Buck! We ain't stickin' around to git our necks stretched for him!"

"Okay!" Steve rapped. "Smoky, go up the street. Give us the signal when you think we can cross without being spotted."

They got across the side street safely. A few minutes more and they were in Guthrie's barn. There were horses enough for all of them.

They were saddling up, when the kitchen door slammed and Randy ran back.

"Who's in there?" he demanded sharply.

"It's all right, kid," Steve answered. "We're taking the horses." He came out of the barn and walked Randy back to the house. Rita had come to the kitchen door. Briefly, he told them how matters stood.

"You're mad if you think you can get away with this," Randy declared tensely. "You know you couldn't get this far without being seen. The word will get around in a minute or two and you'll be trapped here. There'll be a gun-fight, and you know it!"

"You go out to the gate," Steve told him. "If you see them coming, give us a warning. It won't take us long to get away."

"But why should you and father risk your lives to save those lying wretches?" Rita cried. "It isn't worth it, Steve!"

"It'll stop Ducker for the present and save a lot of bloodshed. That's reason enough. You get out there now, Randy. We'll be back sometime tomorrow."

He hurried to the barn. The horses were saddled already, and none too soon, for as they led the animals out and mounted, a sharp cry from Randy told them it was going to be close. With Smoky leading the way, they raced past the house and hit the street. They were seen at once by the onrushing crowd, now only half a block away.

"There they go!" a dozen wild voices chorused together. Without regard for the sheriff and Gant, a fusillade of shots came from their guns. It failed to halt the fleeing men, and in a few seconds the racing broncs put them beyond immediate danger.

SMOKY and Steve realized that pursuit was certain, and that it would not be delayed a moment longer than it took Taylor and his cohorts to run back to the horses they had left tethered at the racks. They were equally certain that the restraint the crowd had exercised up to now was definitely snapped; they had the smell of gunfire in their nostrils, and the excitement of the chase would remove the last hope of holding them in line.

This main-travelled road to the north was easily followed, and short of Spanish Pass offered no chance of shaking off a cavalcade of hard-riding, determined men, familiar with every inch of it. Steve hoped when it became evident that Smoky and he were not trying to run Buck and his pals back to the Etten ranch, that some of the pursuers would drop out. Two hours later, he was forced to admit that its effect had been negligible. They were north of the road to the Box E and the Mule Shoe and striking into the hills when he was able to look back and see fully two score riders toiling along behind them at a distance of a mile or more. In the moonlight, they were clearly visible.

"They're back there! Plenty of them!" he yelled at Guthrie. "We'll be through the Pass before they can overhaul us!"

Once through Spanish Pass, the choice of continuing on to Salt Springs or swinging off to Ute Crossing and using the back trail to the north would be theirs. The marshal decided to take neither. Instead, he planned to climb the hills to the west, cross the railroad from Broken Mesa and reach the Rocky Mountain Short Line junction at Dora. He acquainted Smoky with this as they pounded along. The latter gave it his approval.

"They'll look for us to head for the Crossin'!" he called back. "They'll split up and work both roads!"

Steve hoped to elude all pursuit. The worst that could happen, he felt, would be to find only a handful of men still following them.

Without any thought of sparing their horses, they flashed through the Pass. A mile beyond, they dropped down a steep slope and pulled up in the shadows of some scrub brush.

"Don't any of you lose your heads

and try to bust out of here!" Guthrie warned Buck and the others.

In several minutes, the thunder of shod hoofs swept past above them.

"All right," Steve said, when the night was still once more, "we can get moving."

Eight miles of the toughest sort of going brought them to the railroad junction at Dora. There was nothing there but the station and the agent's house. A long freight that had been standing on the siding was out on the main-line.

"That's a break!" Smoky exlaimed.

"Better than I expected," said Steve. "We're just in time!"

The freight conductor stood on the platform, waving his lantern. Gant rode up to him and piled out of his saddle. Ed McKeever, the conductor, fell back, startled and alarmed until he recognized the marshal.

"You took a couple of years off my life, riding up that way, Steve! What's going on?"

"Ed, Smoky and I have three birds in tow that we want you to drop off across the Wyoming line. Is it okay with you?"

"Sure! They'll have to step lively. I'll take 'em all the way into Cheyenne if you say so."

"Just keep an eye on them," said Steve.

Smoky had come up with the men.

"Hanna, you and your pals are hopping this freight. Don't try to drop off this side of Cheyenne. Do the three of you understand that?"

Buck and the other two nodded and started to move toward the track.

"Just a minute!" the marshal snappd. "You're leaving this country of your own free will. Is that right?"

"Yeh!" Hanna grunted.

STEVE turned to the conductor. "Just remember that, Ed; we might have to ask you to repeat it some day." With a movement of his hand he indicated that the three were free to climb aboard the moving freight. They didn't have to be told twice. "Keep out of Western Colorado, unless a court order brings you back!"

He and Smoky stood there until the freight was rattling over the rails.

"That's good riddance to bad rubbish," the latter observed grimly. "But I never figgered you'd handle it quite that way at the last minute. I thought you'd try to force an admission from 'em that the story they told Evers was a lie from start to finish."

"What good would it be?" Steve's tone was harsh. Evers would have got a warrant out for Jeff no matter what the testimony had been. What he got from them just gave him an excuse for his action. If they recanted now it wouldn't change a thing. Our next move is to face Taylor's crowd and make them realize this was the best way out."

"Mornin' will be time enough for that," Smoky grumbled. "I ain't goin' to make that stiff climb back to the Salt Springs road tonight; we'll take it easy and drop down around by way of the Calumet. We can git a bed at the mine. That'll give things time enough to cool off a little."

Gant found the suggestion a wise one. With tempers so high tonight, he realized that a word could bring on a clash with even Cass Southard. "They certainly think we crossed them up," he said. "I'm not so sure the passage of a few hours will bring them to their senses."

He had reason to recall the remark when Smoky and he rode into Taylor's place the next morning. The yard was full of men, just back from the long, fruitless ride to Salt Springs. They were frankly hostile. Taylor and Cass came out of the house, their old friendliness buried beneath a wall of animosity.

"Where have you hid 'em?" Thad growled.

"They're in Cheyenne," Steve informed him. "If there's any reason left in you, this would be a good time to show it."

Without further preamble, he told them what the sheriff and he had

done. Thad and his followers began to look uncomfortable.

"You'd have lynched those men if you had got your hands on them last night. The war would have been on, and the next thing you'd have here would have been martial law. I don't mind facing lead from my enemies but I hate to see my friends using their guns on me. What does a man have to do to convince you people that he's on your side?"

"IT was a mistake, Steve," Taylor declared unhappily. "I don't blame you for giving us hell. Of course, we thought you was trying go run them to cover, and I warned you we wouldn't stand for that. Anyhow, Ducker's been stopped this time, and that's what we were out to do."

"Don't pat yourselves on the back yet," Guthrie observed dryly. "He'll have another try at it. Mart doesn't fold up just because he's been knocked down."

The talk cleared the air, and after a few minutes Steve was ready to leave.

"Before you go," said Cass, "come into the house; Thad and I want to make you a proposition on the Mule Shoe."

The offer they made seemed fair. In Randy's name Steve accepted it.

"You better ride into town this afternoon and close the deal; I may be going back to Silver City on the evening train," he advised. He mentioned Jeff's request that Scotty and Pete be taken care of. Southard agreed to that promptly.

Gant and the sheriff got away soon after. Riding into town, they found it quiet enough but the air was still charged with an electric tension.

"Be an hour or two before the news gits around," Smoky muttered. "We'll be hearin' from Ducker soon as it does."

"I'm ready for him any time," said Steve. His lean face was stony with resolve. "He won't get anything out of me about the bushwhacking the old man got, but he'll square that some day just as surely as he'll pay up for what he's doing to Jeff."

CHAPTER XI

Bitter Medicine

THOUGH Smoky and he had returned safely, and the night had gone their way, Steve drew no sense of elation from it. He had checkmated Mart Ducker, but it was only a minor victory; the real issue between them would not be decided today or tomorrow. It would take weeks, perhaps months. Looking into the future, he realized that the killing of his father and the wrong Jeff had suffered would not be easily avenged. In his very singleness of purpose, he had only to contemplate the difficulties that would be put in his way to be filled with grim moodiness.

Rita and Randy were full of questions, as he expected. Seeing them so sober, he tried to give their spirits a lift by putting away his own anxieties and pretending to believe that the situation, as far as Jeff was concerned, was less desperate than it seemed. He didn't get very far with that, and as they sat down to dinner, Randy said:—

"You're saying what you know isn't a fact, Steve. Ducker will keep that warrant alive as long as he's got Evers and Judge Ogilvie under his thumb."

"There may be some changes around here on Election Day."

"Maybe. In the meantime, what's Jeff going to be doing? What does any man do in this western country if he's on the dodge? He throws in with outlaws. It's the only company in which he's safe. Sooner or later, he goes out with them to hoist a bank or stick up a train. After that, there's no coming back."

Smoky came to the marshal's aid. "It don't always work out that way," he averred. "There was Bill Jackman; we tried to bring him in for two years. He had a murder hangin' over him, just the same as Jeff. We knew he was runnin' with owlhoots, Brown's Park, down Vernal way and out there on the plateau and the San Rafael Swell. When another man confessed the killin' and Bill came

back, there wasn't a mark ag'in him. He's a respected citizen today."

Steve went off at a tangent. "Randy, if you were the district attorney of this county, what would you do about this charge against Jeff?"

"Why talk about anything as absurd as that?" his brother protested. "I haven't even been admitted to practice yet."

"I'm just saying it for argument's sake. Supposing you were—what could you do? You're Jeff's brother; any step you took would be questioned. You know his side of the shooting, but you couldn't accept it. I doubt that you could kill the charge for lack of evidence."

"I certainly wouldn't try to do it," Randy declared positively. "I'd get Jeff to give himself up and take the case to trial. An honest judge would quickly throw it out. If he didn't, and a jury ever got it, Jeff would be acquitted in jig time!"

"I like the way you say that, Randy!" Rita exclaimed excitedly. "I believe every word of it!"

Steve saw something in her eyes that gave him a bad moment. "I'd agree to that in a minute, if we could get Evers out of office and put an honest man in his place," he said. "Do you agree with me that any statement we might have got out of Hanna last night that he lied about the shooting would be worthless?"

"Under the present setup it would be worthless. You know Ogilvie has signed the warrant already. Evers has undoubtedly communicated with other county prosecutors by this time. In a few hours, you and Smoky and every other peace officer in the country will be charged with the responsibility of hunting Jeff down. If I know him, he'll be hard to catch!"

"I hope he's never caught," Rita declared loyally. "I don't know why you should feel you can't be elected, Randy. You may be young, but you've got a head on you, and you know how to fight. If people had a chance to vote for you, they'd know why you were in the race and what they were voting for. Who was Jesse Evers until the county commissioners, those great politicians, put his name on the ticket?"

SHE had barely finished, when someone rapped loudly on the front door. She started to get up.

"I'll see who it is," Steve told her. When he opened the door, Mart Ducker stood there, his blue eyes burning with a cold fire.

"It won't take me long to tell you what I've got to say!" he got out with an angry rasp. "You and Guthrie ran those three men out of Colorado last night, and I'm here to tell you you'll pay for it! I don't take a kicking around from you or any man!"

"Have you had your say?" Steve inquired coolly. Ducker ignored the question.

"You've got too big for your boots, Gant! You're asking for a showdown with me, and you're going to get it. I'll have those men back here in a hurry, and I'll see to it that they have all the protection they need!"

"That's a lot of wind, Ducker; you won't be able to drag Buck Hanna and Wiley back to Colorado. I don't believe you'll have any better luck with Frank Zuber. They ran out on you because they knew you were ready to toss them to the wolves. They left this state of their own free-will, and I can produce the evidence any time it becomes necessary."

Without raising his voice Steve packed into what he was saying the full measure of his indomitable will. It got to Mart Ducker and made his own loud-mouthed ranting seem empty by comparison. He knew he had been told the truth about his hired gunmen.

"You'll be held to account for your part in it!" he cried, so infuriated by the knowledge that Buck and the other two had deserted him that he couldn't hold himself in. "When people get tough with me, I know how to get tough, too! I offered your old man twice what his ranch is worth. Spangler repeated the offer to your brother. It may take a little time, but I'll buy it now at my own price. I bought the mortgage from the bank this morning. I'll show you and the

kid what it means to have the squeeze put on you!"

Steve's mouth was touched with a smile of grim amusement. "You'll find yourself doing business with some other people, Mart. The Mule Shoe has been sold to Southard and Taylor. They'll be in town this afternoon to sign the papers and satisfy the mortgage."

Ducker stood there swaying with the shock of his surprise for a moment, his heavy jaw thrust out at a menacing angle. Smoky had come to the door, and just behind him, Rita and Randy. Mart Ducker's blazing eyes remained fastened on the marshal.

"What do you mean, telling me Taylor and Southard have bought the place between them?" he demanded.

"Thad's taking the lower range; Cass is buying everything beyond Squaw Mountain. Keeping the Box E road closed won't be any inconvenience to them. And I imagine they'll put men enough along the line to see that their fence isn't cut or broken down accidentally, or otherwise."

IT knocked all the noise out of Mart. Though he was a man with abundant health, the color drained away from his face and his cheek muscles drooped with the violence of his wrath.

"You'll regret this," he said at last. "There isn't going to be room enough in Colorado to hold the two of us."

"Spangler made the same threat," Steve observed thinly. "I expected something better from you. I know you've always had things your own way. By bribery and promises of political support, you've had an easy time of it. You're going to find it different here; Evers and Ogilvie will do the best they can for you, but it won't be enough. If I'm interested personally, you know why."

Ducker's answer was a scornful grunt. "Gant, you're not kidding yourself; you know you haven't got me stopped."

"You won't grab all that government range up in the Red Bluffs this season and make it your own private reserve. By the time next spring rolls around, you may be thinking of other things."

Mart's blue eyes were venomous in their cold intensity again. "In the meantime, I'll give you plenty to think about! I'm offering a reward of a thousand dollars for the arrest of Jeff Gant."

"Only a thousand?" Steve's tone was mocking. "If you're doing it for Spangler, a thousand dollars is a little shabby of you; I figured Joe rated higher than that. You'll miss him, Mart. You won't be able to sit in your office in Silver City and send someone else out to do your dirty work with the efficiency Joe Spangler brought to the job."

Ducker couldn't stand anymore. With a violent curse, he stamped off the porch and strode down the street, storming to himself.

"You dusted him off to a T!" Smoky declared with gleeful satisfaction. "That rattler never had anybody stand up to him like that before. . . Let's go back and finish dinner."

"Please," Rita urged. "I put the roast back in the oven to keep it hot." She had never been so proud of Steve. In her eyes, there had been something magnificent about him as he faced Mart Ducker. She could understand his driving desire to avenge his father and Jeff, but he was also championing the right of men to be free. He would need help, and she promised herself that Randy would supply it; that every effort she could make would be to that end.

Steve listened to the talk around the table about what Ducker had said without having much to say, himself. It was his opinion that putting a price on Jeff was largely an empty gesture.

"It's bound to make a difference," Rita insisted. "Some blackleg will give information about him to get part of the money."

"That often happens," he admitted. "But it's not what Ducker is counting on. He knows Jeff will hear that

a price has been put on him and that it'll make him twice as careful and kill any idea he might get of coming in and giving himself up. Looking at it that way it improves our chances of doing something for him. What I'm afraid of is that Jeff may get to brooding over it and take some reckless step that will put him outside the law for keeps. But it's foolish to sit here torturing ourselves with such speculations. . . Randy, did you ever read the mortgage the old man gave the bank?"

"Yes, I went in with him when he renewed it the last time."

"Is there anything in it that will give Ducker the right to refuse payment in full at this time?"

"No notice has to be given, if that's what you mean. There'll be a penalty of a couple months' interest. That won't amount to much. I know we're lucky to have Southard and Thad take the place over, but it gives me a twinge to see it go; the Mule Shoe is the only home we ever knew. When do they plan to take possession?"

"At once, I imagine. If there's anything out there we want, we're free to take it. They're going to have Jed Nesmith draw the legal papers. Suppose you meet us there at three o'clock; Smoky and I will be in the sheriff's office for a few minutes."

He stepped into the bedroom after dinner and packed his bag.

"I hate to see you pull out," Smoky told him. "At least, we'll have Randy here a few days longer. I'll keep in touch with you by wire if anythin' turns up."

STEVE nodded. To his brother, he said: "I wish you'd spend a day with me in Silver City on your way back to the University. I'll make it a point to be there. Chances are it'll be our last opportunity to get together for some time."

"You're coming up to Boulder to see me get my degree, aren't you?"

"I'm certainly going to try to be there, Randy. It would be nice if all of us could make it." He saw his brother's eyes go to Rita.

"Will you come?" he asked her. "It would mean a lot to me."

"Yes, I'll be there," she murmured simply. "I don't suppose we'll be able to tear Father away from town, but Steve will just have to make it." Her tone changed. "You are coming to the Mesa to practice?"

"My mind's made up about that," Randy answered soberly.

"Then, why don't you try to get Mr. Nesmith to take you into his office? He's old, and his health is not good; you could do a lot for him and help yourself at the same time. He has a fine library."

She spoke with such earnestness that Steve had to smile. "It's not a bad idea, Rita, if the kid can stand old Jed's sharp tongue. The man knows the law. I've heard several prominent Denver attorneys say that when it came to pleading a case Jed Nesmith didn't have an equal in the state. I heard him defend that dance-hall girl who killed Diamond Billy Lee in Leadville, four years ago. He got her an acquittal. It didn't seem possible."

Randy said he'd have a talk with the lawyer.

In passing the courthouse Guthrie and the marshal noticed that a workman was replacing the broken window.

"There was a couple other things broken here yesterday that won't be repaired so easy," Smoky muttered cryptically. "Ain't nothin' you can do to fix up broken faith. Evers and Ogilvie will find that out."

They found Chuck Cypher pacing up and down the sidewalk in front of the office.

"What's on your mind?" Guthrie inquired.

"Smoky, Nap Dumont's been here four-five times in the last couple hours looking for you and Steve. He wouldn't say anything to me, but he's excited about something. Evers was around early this morning with warrants for Yampa Jackson and Jeff. They're on the desk." Chuck shook his head perplexedly. "That Frenchman has sure got my curiosity up!"

Guthrie went in and took a cursory glance at the warrants. They were

the usual printed forms with the name of the wanted man and the charge against him typed in. "Was Nap drunk?" he asked.

"No, sober as a judge! Told me he'd come in from the Crossin' to see you and would stick around till he did."

"Hunh!" Smoky grunted. "Don't know what's agitatin' him. Go down the street, Chuck, and dig him up."

"That won't be necessary," Gant said from the doorway. "He's coming now."

"Bagosh, it's about time you fellas was showin' up!" Dumont grumbled, as he trod into the office. Though he was as greasy and unkempt as ever, there was an unmistakable air of excitement about him. He hooked a foot in a chair and dragged it up to the desk and sat down heavily. "I got little surprise for you." He caught Cypher's eye and jerked a thumb in the direction of the door. "I talk to Smoky and Steve," he said pointedly.

"You're gettin' kinda particular, ain't you?" Chuck retorted, more disappointed than resentful. "I'll step over to the post office."

"What is all this, Nap?" Steve inquired.

Dumont had waited for this moment and he was not to be hurried. His eyes roamed over Guthrie and the marshal.

"Yampa Jackson is up in de Red Bluff," he announced dramatically.

IT PULLED the sheriff to his feet. Steve was hardly less startled.

"Why do you say that?" Smoky rapped.

"He's shove a gun in my face dis mornin'. I never have nothin' against him, but dat make me damn sore!"

"Nap, tell your story," Steve commanded. "Just what occurred?"

"He come on de Crossin' just before daylight. He come up de stair to my room. He put his gun on me and tell me to get a bag and put some grub in it, and be damn queeck, too. I go in the store with him and put some stuff in a gunnysack. I tell him he is beeg fool for stick around dis country. He got a little biziness to finish, he says; he's goin' to blow Joe Spangler's head off, before he goes. He do some thinkin' about it; dat's what breeng him back."

"Good gravy!" Smoky burst out tensely. "Too bad the skunk didn't take care of that when he had the chance! It would have changed a lot of things."

"Let him finish," Steve urged. "What did you say to him, Nap?"

"I told him he's too late; dat Spangler is dead; dat Jeff finish him. It take me couple minute to make him believe it. When I tell him dat Jeff is on de dodge, by Gar, Yampa don't waste no more time! He grab the sack and run out to his bronc. He take the ranger trail into de Red Bluff. I get my horse and follow him 'bout a mile; he don't turn off or try to cut back."

"How much grub did he want?" Gant asked.

"Enough for t'ree, four day."

"Then he doesn't intend to stay in the Bluffs any longer than he has to. It was five o'clock when he left the Crossing. It's almost three now." Steve counted the hours off on his fingers. "Ten hours! That's been time enough for him to get below the Mesa, cross the railroad and head west. He's undoubtedly thirty-five miles ahead of us right now."

"With a start like that, there's no point in tryin' to run him down," said Guthrie. "Even if we were lucky, it would take us two to three hours to pick up his trail. Night would be just ahead of us. Come daylight, we'd be far behind."

"Let him run," Steve declared. "It'll be time enough to go after him when he thinks he's safe. "Nap, have you said anything about this to anyone?"

"Non!"

"Then don't. Keep it to yourself. The information won't be worth anything to us if it gets noised about."

Dumont sat around for some time before he left. Steve told him that Southard and Thad were buying the Mule Shoe. He didn't have much to say about it, but it interested him. He had been gone several minutes when Smoky voiced a question that

was on the marshal's mind as well as his own.

"Why do you suppose Nap came through with this news, Steve?"

"It's hard for me to understand. I know he's opened up several times when you put the heat on, but this is the first instance in which he came through voluntarily. When you take your living from men outside the law, you can't afford to do any talking. Nap must have had a strong reason."

Guthrie's eyes puckered shrewdly. "I wonder if he knows that Jackson and Ike Slack killed your father. That could explain it; Carse saved Dumont's bacon once. That was a long time ago — you and Jeff were just children—but he may remember it."

Steve found it entirely credible. More than once he had seen men of Dumont's stripe turn against their own kind to repay a favor. Their records might be bad and their moral fibre weak, but a sense of gratitude seemed to remain in them.

"You may have called the turn," he declared thoughtfully. "If Nap knows the truth about that business it could turn into a wonderful break for us. The stand he took against Ducker, when we were at the Crossing, was a little hard for me to believe. But it was right in line with what he's done today."

"For the present, we better be satisfied with knowin' he's on our side," Smoky remarked. "Try to pin him down and he'll lie out of it."

"We don't want to scare him off," Steve agreed. "He'll use what he knows in his own way. He's ignorant, but he's got a good dose of the usual blackleg shrewdness in him. I don't believe the fact that we've said so little about the old man's murder has fooled him a bit. I think he's dead sure we're out to get Mart Ducker for it."

THE thought remained with Gant as he and Randy sat down with Cass and Taylor in Nesmith's office. The details of the sale of the Mule Shoe were concluded satisfactorily. When they got up to leave, the old lawyer asked the brothers to remain a minute.

"This youngster wants to come in with me next month," he said to Steve, when they were alone. "I'm agreeable to it if he'll keep his nose to the grindstone and just remember he's got a lot to learn. That sheepskin he's getting won't make him a lawyer."

"I think he realizes that, Jed," Steve said. "I don't know anyone I'd rather see him under than you."

Nesmith scoffed at the compliment and ran a hand through his white hair. "There won't be much money in it, at first. I don't want you to be handing it out to him, Steve. Let him live within his means and make his own way; that's the only way for a young lawyer to get his feet on the ground. I've spoken to him about Jeff and your father. We'll try to do something about that."

A boy delivered the evening paper as they sat there. At the bottom of the front page there was a two-column ad announcing a reward of a thousand dollars for the arrest, or information leading to the arrest, of Jeff. Ducker's name, as president of the Drovers' League, was signed to it. Nesmith cut it out and pinned it on the wall.

"We'll put it there where you'll be sure to see it, Randy. I hope every time you look at it it will fire you with the determination to get the knowledge and experience that'll enable you to fight all tyrants."

Steve and Randy met Rita on the street a few minutes after they stepped out of the little frame building Nesmith had occupied for forty years. She heard the news with frank enthusiasm.

"Just being associated with Mr. Nesmith will help tremendously," she said. "I know he's cantankerous, but people respect his judgment."

She was full of plans for Randy's future. Steve was not surprised to have her say she had already spoken to one of her neighbors about a room for his brother. These were little things in themselves, but they kept recurring, and he could no longer refuse to recognize their meaning. The

admission plunged the knife of despair deep into the heart of his own hopes and dreams. He had kept his secret well, and he was thankful for that.

"I don't want either of them ever to suspect that I was once foolish enough to think I might claim her," he thought. "In their eyes, I suppose I'm an old man; even at thirty-three you can't laugh off ten to twelve years."

He was actually glad to get away from the Mesa. He would have preferred to walk down to the station alone, but Rita insisted they would go with him. With the arrival of the train, he said good-bye to his brother and exchanged a parting word or two with Smoky. Facing Rita was not so easy. Though his gray eyes were inscrutable, she seemed to sense his despair, but without surmising the cause.

"Things will work out, Steve," she said bravely. "I'm sure you'll find a way. And don't worry about Randy; you're leaving him in good hands."

"The best in the world," he murmured, and with a tender smile, added: "He doesn't know how lucky he is."

CHAPTER XII

The Wolf Bares His Fangs

RANDY GANT received his degree six weeks later and went on to pass his bar examinations with flying colors. Steve had thrown himself into his work with savage zeal, hoping in that way to ease the ache in his heart. Though he was proud of Randy's success, the brief trip to Boulder with Rita reopened the old wound and sent him back to Silver City to begin the fight all over again.

He had a letter from his brother several days later, saying he was now established in Nesmith's office and referring enthusiastically to his prospects and the progress he was making. He wrote that he was having dinner with Guthries, in closing.

"They'll be seeing a lot of each other," Steve said to himself. "The sooner I realize that this is the way it's got to be and stop the brooding, the quicker I'll get some peace of mind."

Through his own dependable deputy marshals, Flint Killian and Henry (Honey) Hanks, railroad company detectives, county peace officers and stockmen, he had begun a systematic hunt for information regarding the whereabouts of Yampa Jackson. The earth seemed to have opened and swallowed the man. Even federal marshals in Utah and Wyoming were unable to help him. Often that summer, he disappeared into the wild, uninhabited country along the Colorado-Utah line for days at a time, in a vain search for some trace of Jackson. But even roaming far and wide across the Uncompaghre Plateau, the favorite retreat of lesser renegades, bore no results.

"There's only one place in Colorado where we haven't looked for him," he said one evening, as he sat in his office in Silver City with Killian and Honey. He had just returned from another fruitless trip.

"We won't find him there," Honey declared with conviction. He was a man-hunter of long experience, fearless and hard-headed. "Jackson doesn't rate with the bunch that hangs out in the Park. Well-known owlhoots like Cassidy, Wild Bill Hicks and the Deadwood Kid wouldn't trust him as far as they could see him. They know he's a double-crossing, small-time badman; they'd run him out of Brown's Park as soon as he showed his face."

"Honey's right," Killian agreed. "Jackson's holed up somewheres down in the Mormon country—Moab or Lee's Ferry."

Gant shared their opinion that Yampa was not in Brown's park. But the weeks were slipping away, and he feared that the man would take part in some foray outside the law that might lead to his death. As he had told Jeff, Jackson dead would be of no help to them.

"There's one way we can settle it," he said; "we can go into the Park."

Honey and Killian shook their heads, and the latter said: "You've

been there, Steve; a deserted camp was all you found. They've got guards posted. They'll shoot it out with us, or drop back and the whole bunch will just drift across the line into the Red Desert, in Wyoming. In a pinch, they'll cross the Green and fade into Utah and the Uinta Reservation."

He was only voicing facts that were well-known to each of them. Few peace officers had ever had the temerity to attempt to reach that park-like valley in the mountain wilderness on Green River. Fewer still had lived to do it. A generation of outlaws had used it as a sanctuary and made it the main station on the owlhoot trail between Montana and the Hole in the Wall country and the Robbers' Roost and the broken uplands far down on the Colorado River. Comparatively safe there in summer, they were doubly secure in winter, when snow blocked the trails. Perhaps it was only a gesture of good-will or gratitude toward the State of Colorado, but it was a fact that though they gathered within its borders they did their plundering elsewhere.

"All right," Steve gave in ;"we'll hold off a little longer. Jackson must be needing money; he'll try his hand at something."

THERE was always one other question he put to the two men after his absences. Honey answered it for him this evening without waiting to be asked.

"Not a whisper about him," he said. "The League's sent out a circular with his description and the reward notice. You may have seen 'em tacked up. They don't last long; somebody always tears 'em down."

Ducker was in Silver City. Steve encountered him on the street almost daily when he was in town. Nothing had come of Mart's threats to get his scalp.

"He's trying it another way," Gant thought. "He hasn't forgotten."

He took the train to the Mesa the next morning. The chief purpose of his visit was to see Nap Dumont. He knew the Frenchman had contacts through which he kept himself informed about what went on in Brown's Park. He was certain Nap could answer the question uppermost in his mind if he could persuade him to talk.

Smoky was surprised when Steve walkedin on him without warning. The sheriff had a piece of news.

"Did you know that Buck Hanna and Frank Zuber were committed to the Pen in Laramie City on Monday?"

"Why, no," Gant answered, mildly startled. "What's behind it?"

"The two of them, with Chalk Wiley, were caught robbin' a store in Chugwater, Wyomin'. The town marshal killed Wiley. The other two got sent up for ten years. If we ever want 'em, we've got their address."

"That certainly takes them out of circulation," Steve observed dryly. He got what details Guthrie had. Their conversation drifted naturally from Hanna and Zuber to Yampa.

"If you go to Ute Crossin' alone, you may git Nap to open up to you," Smoky told him, when he understood what the marshal had in mind. "It's worth a try. . . No word about Jeff, eh?"

Steve shook his head. "Not a thing. I figure that no news is good news. By the way, Clint Rossman got on the train at Encino. He'd been down there selling some horses. He wanted to know if there was anything to the talk that Thad and Southard were going to get Randy to run for district attorney this fall. I asked him where he'd heard that, and he told me Rita had been buzzing his wife the last time she was in town and got her promise to vote for him."

Smoky laughed. "She's sure startin' in early! I never had no campaign put on like that for me. The girl's dead serious about it, Steve. She's gitin' the womenfolks lined up. Have you seen Randy?"

Steve said no.

"He's doin' fine. The court's sittin'. He's argued a couple small cases for Jed and won 'em both. We can stop in and say hello to him on the way to the house. You goin' to head for the Crossin' right away?"

"I thought so. What's the situation out on the range?"

"Quiet. Unnaturally quiet, if you want my private opinion," Smoky replied with sudden soberness. "Mal Thrasher, Ducker's new field boss, has been bringin' in more sheep and men. But he's gone out of his way to avoid trouble. It strikes me that the League is sittin' back and strengthenin' its hand, and that this is just the quiet before the storm. I was talkin' to Taylor yesterday. He's got his Cattlemen's Protective Association all organized. They had a meetin' a fewnights ago and the talk there was just about what I've been tellin' you. Nobody believes this is anythin' more than a truce."

"It would be foolish to regard it as anything else," Steve said.

THEY spent a few minutes with Randy, the latter getting his brother's promise to spend a day or two in the Mesa.

"I don't suppose we'll find Rita at home," Smoky observed, as they neared the house. "There's a party over at the Whitted's. She'll be sorry to have missed you."

Steve nodded. "I'll see her tomorrow." He had prepared himself for meeting her and was resolved to take it in stride, and yet when Smoky tried the door and found it locked, he was secretly relieved.

"If someone had to take her away from me," he thought, as he settled down to the long ride to Ute Crossing, "I'm glad it was Randy. There's no reason why I should feel embarrassed or awkward about meeting her."

The sun was pouring down on Dumont's establishment and Nap had moved a chair half-way around the shady side of the building, where he was stretched out comfortably, when Gant rode in. He sat up, blinking his eyes at his visitor. He didn't have to be told that the marshal was there for a purpose.

Steve recognized that fact,too, and wasted very little time on preliminary conversation. When he got to the point, Nap's eyes remained as vacant as ever.

"You make mistake, Steve," he protested; "I don't know nothin' 'bout dose fella out in de Park. If sometime someone pass on de crossin', I don't ask no question; de less I know, de better I like him."

"Don't get me wrong," said Steve. "I'm not here to do any checking up on you. But don't lie to me, Nap. Without breaking confidence with your friends you can tell me whether Yampa Jackson is out there or not."

Nap shrugged non-committally. "Sure, I can tell you. But how you know it's de truth? I think she's better I don't say anythin'."

The marshal refused to admit failure. "You play your hand awfully close to your vest, Nap."

The Frenchman shrugged. "Mebbe we both do, eh?"

"Okay," Steve said, after several moments of deliberation, "I'm going to take a chance on you and put my cards on the table. Jackson and Ike Slack killed my father. You've heard it said that Slack was dead when Scotty and Pete picked him up. That's not true; Smoky and I got a statement from him. He admitted the killing."

SOME of the slack went out of Dumont's flabby face and his squinting eyes were almost lost behind their mounds of fat. "Your ole man was my friend. He did me a good turn once, Steve. . . Did Ike say anythin' 'bout Spangler and Ducker?"

"Yes," Gant acknowledged. "But his word alone won't be enough to do the trick. It's my hunch that you know more about that job than you've ever said."

"They got Carse," the Frenchman growled. "I was on de way home from de Mesa dat night. I heard de shots and I pull off de road. In couple minute Yampa and Slack come tearin' past. I git away damn queeck; I don't want to be blame for dat beeziness!"

"Did they say anything as they passed you?"

Dumont nodded stonily. "Yampa say, 'Dat's de way Mart wanted it.'"

"Good God!" Steve groaned. "Why

didn't you come to me with this? Why didn't you nail him when he was here?"

"By Gar, dat's good, you ask me dat now!" Dumont exclaimed angrily. "I don't know you git anythin' from Ike Slack! All I know is what I see on de road at Vollmer Crick! You think Evers take my word for dat? Bagosh, first thing I know, I find myself in jail if I say anythin'!"

"I guess you're right at that, Nap," Steve was forced to agree. "But you can understand why I want Jackson."

"*Oui!* He's not in de Park, Steve. Dat's de truth! Don't go lookin' dere for him. Dat's good place for you to stay away from."

There was an inference in this that made Gant's head go up an inch or two. His gray eyes drilled into Dumont. "Jeff?" he asked.

"I say no more!" Nap snarled. "And dis time I mean it!"

It was answer enough for Steve, and his thoughts were somber and conflicting as he planned to spend a few minutes with Southard. Though his mind was upset by what Dumont had told him, he decided to do as he had intended.

Dusty Clemmons was in the yard when the marshal rode in. "You missed Cass," he said. "Taylor sent a man up here about an hour ago with word that he wanted to see him at once. I don't know what's up. Association business, I reckon."

"I'll drop in when I go by there," Steve told him. "I didn't have anything important to say."

HE WAS at Taylor's ranch an hour later. He found a dozen cattlemen gathered there. A glance was enough to communicate their excitement to him.

"Here's Steve Gant!" Southard exclaimed. "Maybe he can tell us something about this." He thrust out a torn sheet of paper bearing the cryptic words "Notice to all concerned" at the top, as Steve joined the group gathered around the corral gate. "Have you seen it?"

"I don't know, Cass. What is it?"

"It's a notice from U. S. Land Office notifying the public that about twenty thousand acres of rangeland is going to be lopped off the Red Bluffs Reserve and sold to the highest bidder!"

The marshal took the paper in his hands and read the description of the land that was to be sold at public auction by the deputy commissioner on the steps of the courthouse in Broken Mesa, two days hence. The parcel comprised the strip paralleling the ranger trail from a point half-a-mile east of Ute Crossing to the summit and cutting back into the Reserve for a distance of five miles. It was the poorest stretch of range in the entire Government holdings. Cowmen, who had to pay for the permits to run their cattle on the Red Bluffs, never grazed their stocks there. But Gant realized that that was beside the point; this was Mart Ducker's cleverly arranged scheme to accomplish his avowed purpose of closing the Reserve to every stockman but himself.

"It's plain enough what this means," he declared with undisguised gravity. "I guess we all felt there was something moving under the surface of this spell of inactivity. No question but this is what Ducker's been busy putting through. . . The law requires that on these land sales, thirty days' notice be given. Have these posters been displayed that long?"

"I suppose they can prove that they have!" Taylor answered wrathfully. "They've been put up where a man would never see 'em! Rufe Sellars found this one tacked on that deserted shack in Dinwiddie Canyon!"

"It was on the side of the buildin', where a man would never see it!" Sellars explained. "I was lookin' for a piece of timber to prop up a broken post in my line fence; that's how I ran into it!"

"We knew Ducker had corrupted Ogilvie and Evers," gaunt Jim Emory, the secretary of the Association, got out bitterly, "but we didn't figure the Government would play his dirty game!"

"It's my opinion that the only Government man who's sold out to the League in this steal is Huck Necker, the Deputy Land Commissioner in

Silver City," was Gant's answer. "It isn't possible that he doesn't know what's behind the game."

"Necker has evidently made out a pretty good case with his superiors in the Land Office to get an okay on this," Steve told them. "This strip of range has never been used; a cow couldn't find a living on it. On the surface, selling it to private owners looks like a sound economical step. I don't know what you've decided to do about it, but my advice would be not to waste your time and money going into a federal court to get an injunction against the sale. Maybe you could prove collusion between Necker and the League. Chances are you couldn't. You've got to be ready by ten a. m. day after tomorrow."

"I agree with Steve," Cass declared. "The best way out of this is to toe the line with Ducker and beat him at his own game. We've got to have a road into the Reserve. The only way we can be sure of it is to buy our way in. When we see the map we'll be able to decide on which sections we've got to have. If we take 'em across the lower tier, we'll be doin' the right thing."

"But even that's goin' to mean buyin' five sections of worthless rock and gravel!" Sellars objected. "I ain't got the money to sink in anythin' like that!"

He was supported by five or six other men.

"I ain't anxious to throw my money away, either," Southard told them. "If you can show me how we can stay in business if we don't send our stuff into the Reserve in summer, I'll be glad to listen."

"You answer yourself," Taylor declared; "without the Reserve, we're licked. If you'll put up the money for one section, Cass, I'll do the same." He turned to Emory. "Jim, can't you work out some arrangement by which the Association can bid in the rest and divide the cost and ownership among the members?"

"I can, if they approve," Emory replied. "It'll mean about four thousand dollars all together. I'll put up five hundred."

All the members were not present, but from those that were, he got promises enough to guarantee that the full amount could be raised.

"You want to be there with the cash," Steve warned. "Don't give Necker any opportunity to rule you out on any technicality like not being able to accept a bank check."

The afternoon was well along before the meeting broke up. Thad urged Gant to stay for supper.

"I better not," Steve said. "The Guthries and Randy will be looking for me. I won't leave the Mesa until this thing's been settled. I'll see you when you get in."

Thad nodded. "I suppose Ducker will be on hand."

"Undoubtedly. He's been sharpening his teeth for this for some time, I reckon. I hope he finds himself sitting down to an empty platter."

Taylor caught something in between the words that made him look up. "Is there any doubt of it in your mind, Steve?"

"Only that this is one trick Ducker has to win. He'll go a long way to pull it out of the fire."

CHAPTER XIII

Trouble Ahead

STEVE returned to the Mesa resolved to say nothing about Jeff being in Brown's Park. That Jeff was there, consorting with known outlaws, did not mean necessarily that he had tarred himself with that brush. But as Randy had once said, when a man found himself in that position it was only a question of time before he found himself taking part in a bank or train robbery, or some other major crime, and living by his gun.

The marshal took it for granted that some peace officer had located Jeff in the remote spot in the Rocky Mountain States, where he had spent the last several months in fancied security, and that it was only because he knew the law was but a step behind him that he had made his way into the outlaw rendezvous. Just who had vouched for him and made it possible for him to remain, Steve did not

know. He doubted that Jeff had had any previous acquaintance with any of them.

It's fortunate for both of us that Jackson isn't there," he mused. "I couldn't stay away from Brown's Park if I thought it was my duty to go there."

Rita ran out on the porch as he turned in at the house.

"Steve!" she cried. "It's awfully good to see you!" Stepping into the driveway, she reached up and shook his hand warmly. "Father was sure you'd be in about this time. We've been waiting for you."

Randy had joined them. From the doorway, Smoky told him to put up the horse. "You git down, Steve, and come in. We asked Randy over, figgerin' you'd be here."

The heartiness of his welcome dispelled Steve's self-consciousness. In the brief period that had elapsed since he had seen Rita last, she seemed to have matured.

"Father told me about your meeting Mr. Rossman on the train," she said lightly. "I get a lot of twitting around this house over my campaigning. Randy and Father won't take it seriously yet. But they will one of these days."

"It sounds serious enough to me," Steve told her. "Do you think he's going to have a chance?"

"Steve, you're making fun of me, too!"

"Not a bit! I mean it in dead earnest!"

"Well, I'm glad someone takes me seriously," Rita murmured, with a sigh of relief. "Randy's got better than a chance; he's going to win."

"It's ridiculous," the subject of their conversation protested from the kitchen doorway. "I haven't the necessary legal background yet. I'm two or three years away from it, at least."

"What does Nesmith have to say about it?" Steve inquired.

"We've never discussed it. I doubt that's he's heard anything about it."

"Wal, I'm surprised if he hasn't," Smoky declared. "There ain't much happens around here that he don't know about. If he was ag'in it, you'd have heard about it before this."

With characteristic abruptness, he changed the subject. "Did you have any luck at the Crossin', Steve?"

"Yeh, after denying that he knew anything, Nap told me what I wanted to know. Yampa Jackson is not in Brown's Park."

"Can you trust his word?" Rita asked.

"I'm satisfied that he knows what he is talking about. Honey and Killian insist that Jackson has drifted far down into Utah. I'm inclined to agree with them."

THEIR failure to say anything regarding the coming sale of the northern fringe of the Red Bluffs Reservation convinced him that they knew nothing about it. He preferred not to mention it until he was alone with the sheriff. He was equally careful not to say anything concerning Dumont's admission that he had seen Jackson and Slack leaving Vollmer's Creek. Smoky knew him too well not to sense that he was holding back something. After supper, he got him out of the house and walked him down to his office. They had the place to themselves. Guthrie sat down at his desk and fired away at once.

"Come on, Steve, let's have it!"

"I don't know which barrel to give you first," Gant answered soberly. "I took a chance and opened up to Dumont, and it paid off. He heard the shots that killed the old man and saw Yampa and Slack pulling away. Even better, he heard Jackson say 'That's the way Mart wanted it.' "

Smoky made him go over every detail of the story. "That comes purty close to bein' a clincher!" he exclaimed, his eyes snapping with excitement. "You've got enough now to make Jackson talk, if you can only pick him up. Just don't be tempted into makin' a break till you do. If I—" He checked himself abruptly and gave Steve a penetrating glance. "What's the other matter you got up your sleeve?"

"A five-mile slice of the Red Bluffs Reserve is going to be sold to the highest bidder on the courthouse

steps here, day after tomorrow morning."

"Hunh?" Guthrie demanded incredulously. "Where did you git that information?"

The marshal told him what he knew about it. Amazement overwhelmed Smoky and he sat there speechless for a minute. When he found his tongue, it was vitirolic.

"I knew it!" he roared, pounding his desk. "I knew there was somethin' cookin'! Ducker's goin' to git away with this, Steve! He'll show up here ready to go the limit; he'll pay five dolars an acre for that scrub range if he has to!"

"I don't know what he'll do, but he'll be prepared to spring some sort of a surprise. Stock that's ranging in the Reserve now won't be affected; the permits will be good until October, and Ducker won't be stupid enough to attempt to bar the door to their getting out. The pinch will come next May. A lot of things can happen between now and then."

"Don't expect Mesa cowmen to think of that!" Guthrie growled. "When they find themselves beaten, there'll be hell to pay here if they ain't too stunned to fight. We'd be mad not to git set for violence. I want you to send for Killian and Honey. With them and what help we can git from Chuck, we may be able to hold things steady."

STEVE agreed to the suggestion. Guthrie and he walked down to the railroad station and got off a wire to Silver City. On the way back, they were stopped and questioned about the sale of the Reserve range. A small crowd gathered about them to hear what they knew about it. Gant assured them that Smoky and he knew no more than they did.

"Southard and the boys will beat Ducker at his own game," a man declared. "They got the money raised, I hear."

Gant said nothing to the contrary. He realized that the cat was out of the bag now and that the news would run over town like a prairie fire. He was not surprised, therefor, to find Rita and his brother waiting with their questions.

"You know that Ducker has better than a dozen men on the Box E right now," Randy said. "I don't say they're gunmen, but they weren't hired to herd sheep. He'll have them in town to back him up."

"I'm sure he will," Steve agreed. "We'll do the best we can to avoid gun-play. In the meantime, it's idle to borrow trouble."

The following morning, Broken Mesa was alive with rumors and predictions of trouble. Mart Ducker arrived during the day and went to the Box E at once. Honey Hanks and Killian came up on the evening train. Smoky and Gant were waiting for them. Huck Necker, the Deputy Land Commissioner, was not among the passengers.

"Didn't you see anything of Necker?" the marshal inquired. "This was about his last chance to get here in time for the sale, unless he gets Number 7 to stop."

"He was on this train, all right," Honey told him. "He got off at Encino. I reckon he figgered it was safer to spend the night there."

"Evidently!" Guthrie muttered. "He'll hire a rig and drive up in the mornin'."

Gant's deputies were not unknown in the Mesa. Their presence was noted with interest, as they came up the main street. The marshal and Guthrie turned into the hotel with them, and they got a room.

"Do you want to sit down here, or go over to the office?" Smoky asked.

"This will do," said Steve. "Let's find some chairs on the porch."

They encountered Judge Ogilvie as they were stepping out. He looked a hole through Steve and the sheriff without any sign of recognition.

"You're eyes ain't what they used to be, Jube," Smoky observed sarcastically. "Appears you can't even read the hand-writin' on the wall."

Ogilvie restrained himself to a contemptuous snort and walked up to the desk.

"I wonder who he's lookin' for," the old man grumbled.

"I don't know, but he'd be wise to

keep out of sight for a few hours," Steve observed. "That goes for Jesse Evers, too. Someone's apt to remember where that pair's allegiance lies."

IN many ways, the situation was a familiar one to the two deputy marshals. From the glances directed at them and the bits of conversation they caught from the passersby, they were able to catch the pulse of the town.

"There's no fight in these men yet," Honey remarked. "They know they've been handed a stacked deck, but they seem to be pretty confident they can beat the game."

"It all depends on how things go tomorrow mornin'" Guthrie countered. "If they win out, there won't be any trouble, unless Ducker's crowd starts it. Steve followed my hunch in gittin' you up here. Maybe we won't have to take a hand. If we do, I'll git Necker and Mart into the courthouse; it'll be up to the rest of you to hold the crowd off."

Killian and Honey knew Gant had come to the Mesa to see Nap Dumont. The latter asked what luck he had had. The marshal told them what he had learned. "It looks like you had the right hunch, Honey. We can forget about Brown's Park."

"Not for long, I'm afraid," the leathery-faced Honey remarked. "Tom Burke, the Short Line's chief detective, was in Silver City yesterday. He was in the office for an hour. He'd just come out from Denver, where'd he had a confab with some U. P. and D. and R. G. men. He says the railroad companies are getting anxious."

"About what?" Steve asked, vaguely uneasy.

"I don't know where they picked up the information," Hanks answered, "but they claim that Frank Starr was seen in Colorado soon after he busted out of the federal pen at Leavenworth, and that he's been in the Park ever since. With one of the most notorious train robbers in the country on the loose, I suppose it's only natural for the companies to be getting nervous."

"Colorado is a little far west for Frank Starr to be operatin'," Smoky spoke up. "He's a Texas-Oklahoma bandit." A thought flashed across his mind that turned him around to Gant. "Do you suppose that could have been Starr we almost bumped into that night at Dumont's place?"

"I suppose it could have been. He came through the Red Bluffs and his bronc had a strange brand, Nap said. . . Honey, what was on Burke's mind?"

"He's talking about getting you to join with federal marshals from Utah and Wyoming and a bunch of railroad detectives and riding into the Park and cleaning it out."

"You'd think an experienced man like Tom Burke would have better sense," Killian declared disparagingly. "A big posse like that wouldn't even get close."

"It wouldn't be a big posse very long," was old Smoky's biting comment. "About the time it got as far as Vermillion Crick most of your railroad dicks would remember somethin' that needed their immediate attention elsewhere."

Killian and Honey greeted the sally with an appreciative laugh. Steve gave it a smile, but he had nothing to say. Knowing Jeff was in the Park, a concerted drive to clean it out was something he dreaded to contemplate. He realized that his hand could be forced; that the decision to make the attempt would not rest entirely with him. The thought weighed on his mind and he lost track of the conversation. When Smoky suggested that it was time to turn in, he was glad to go along with him.

CHAPTER XIV

The Blow Falls

SOUTHARD and a score of rangemen rode into the Mesa early the next morning. Others drifted into town singly and in pairs until the neighborhood of the courthouse was overflowing with them. As had been the case following the shooting of Joe Spangler, Mesa men were there, too, lending

their support. Business was at a standstill. Huck Necker had arrived before the crowd began to gather and was in the courthouse in Ogilvie's chambers. At nine-thirty, he sent word down to the marshal and sheriff that he wanted to see them. Steve and Guthrie left the latter's office and entered the courthouse from the rear.

"I claim your protection," Necker said at once. He was perspiring freely, though the day was not unduly warm, and he mopped his face and bald head nervously. "I'm here on the legal business of the United States Land Office. The threatening attitude of this crowd can not deter me from conducting this sale. I have my instructions from Washington and I propose to follow them."

"I think you know what you're here to do," said Gant. "If anyone has been fooled by the conniving behind this phony sale, he's not here in Broken Mesa this morning." Huckins squirmed under Steve's cold gaze. "I believe you've been well paid for your part in this dirty business. But my personal feelings are beside the point; you'll have all the protection I can give you, and I speak for the sheriff, too. We'll be on the steps when the sale begins." Guthrie nodded, and said:

"I'll add a word to that: Don't try any tricks."

Ignoring Ogilvie, they returned to the sheriff's office. They had just reached the door when Ducker and his men pulled up at the hitch racks across the way. A chorus of boos greeted them as they moved in a body toward the courthouse steps. Thrasher, Ducker's new lieutenant, was with him.

"They're armed," Steve muttered. "I recognize one or two of them. About the same stripe as Buck Hanna. I guess we better get the boys and walk around there; it's a few minutes of ten."

"What did that baldheaded weasel want of you, Steve?" Honey demanded.

"He's worried a little about his hide. He's asking us to protect him. It's a miscarriage of justice to do it, but that's the way it goes sometimes. We'll go around to the steps if you're ready."

Guthrie had a six-gun in his belt. He decided that would be enough.

When they appeared, the crowd let them through. If Ducker was surprised to find Gant and the two deputy marshals present, he dissembled it sucessfully. His blue eyes fastened on Steve's for a second. Cold hatred flowed between them.

The clock in the steeple of the Methodist church had just finished ringing ten, when Necker stepped out of the door. The courthouse janitor followed him with a blackboard, to which was attached a large map of the land to be sold. The crowd stiffened expectantly.

NECKER began at once to describe the land that was to be sold, particularly as to location, his squeaking voice going off key and betraying the nervousness he tried to conceal with his brusque manner.

"I'll acquaint you with the terms of the sale," he went on. He held up the sheet of paper from which he was reading so that all might be convinced that he was only following the regular procedure governing such Land Office sales.

"Look out for this," Smoke muttered to Steve. "If there's an Ethiopian lurkin' in the wood-pile, we'll see him now!"

Necker ran through five or six regulations with which all were familiar. "Number Seven," he continued to read: "'The terms of this sale will be cash, payable in the legal tender of the United States.'"

That was all right, too.

"Number eight: 'The deputy commissioner in charge of said sale shall ask for bids on the parcel as a whole before offering it for sale in sections'"

"No!" a dozen men roared, Thad Taylor's voice the loudest. He rushed half-way up the steps, shaking his fist at Necker. "Don't try to pull that on us!" he cried. "You can't make this a one-man sale! We're prepared to buy some of this land, but we can't swing it all!"

Guthrie and Steve exchanged an understanding glance. Here was the trickery, just as they had feared.

"Come up, here, Taylor," Necker invited. "I'll let you read the regulations for yourself."

"If that's a bluff, I'll call it!" Thad flung back. "Let's see your instructions!"

Steve was standing close enough to catch the cowman's smothered gasp of despair. Thad's usually florid face was the color of dead ashes. "I reckon that deals us out," he muttered. Handing the paper back to Necker, he turned to Southard and Emory. "It's there in black and white."

Necker took advantage of their dismay to hurry on. "Do I hear a bid for this twenty thousand four hundred and six acres?"

"A dollar and a half," Ducker spoke up promptly.

"One-fifty I'm offered! Is there another bid?" A stunned silence greeted him. "Sold!" he announced. "You are prepared, Mr. Ducker, with the necessary amount in cash, I take it."

"I am," Mart replied.

"Then step inside and the deed will be granted."

It was accomplished as quickly and easily as that. Ducker disappeared in the courthouse with Necker. His men moved across the lawn to the corner of the building and stood in a tight little group, alert and prepared for trouble. Men in the crowd, whose sympathies lay wholly with Cass and the others, began a demonstration, but the eleven cowmen, whose fate had just been decided, were momentarily too crushed to have any part in it. With Taylor leading the way, they went down the walk and crossed the street to the hotel.

"I RECKON that's the end of it," Guthrie said, when, after a few minutes of heated discussion, the crowd began to break up and move away.

"We'll stick where we are until Ducker and Necker get out of town," Steve returned glumly. "There's a train south in twenty minutes; Necker won't let it go without him."

"Wonder what he got out of this?" Honey inquired of no one particular. "A thousand bucks, at least."

"All of that," Killian agreed. "Steve, was that instruction sheet a fake?"

"No. When Necker suggested the advisability of disposing of this land to the high-ups in Washington, he only had to point out that sections of it were next to worthless to get some half-wit there, who knows nothing about things out here, to agree that it would be good business to try to get a bid on it as a whole. Otherwise, the Government would have the worst sections left on its hands. I'm sure a look at the correspondence would prove it."

"It smells!" Smoky growled. "The sale was never properly advertised! From beginnin' to the end, it was a sell-out! It seems there ought to be somethin' could be done about it. As it stands now, it spells the finish of this country!"

"I can't suggest anything better than what I told you once before," said Steve. "A lot of things can happen between now and next May."

Mart Ducker pushed through the door, a satisfied grin on his face, and joined his men. Together, they went to their horses and left the Mesa. They had no sooner gone than Necker came out. The strain he had been under had told on him. His cheeks were sagging.

"You'll have to walk fast if you want to catch that train," Steve said thinly. "We'll fall in behind you. I hope to take a train-ride with you one of these days at Government expense, destination Leavenworth."

"You have no right to insult and humiliate me like this," Necker protested virtuously. "I've only done what was required of me. I'll make you pay for your accusations." It was an impotent threat, and he knew it.

"Start walking," the marshal rapped.

REACHING the station was a trying experience for the Deputy Land Commissioner. Things were said to him which no man should

have to listen to. When the train pulled in, he darted up the steps into the first car like a frightened rabbit.

Randy came looking for Steve and Guthrie an hour later. "Taylor and the other officers of the Association are in the office to have a conference with Mr. Nesmith," he told them. "They'd like to have the two of you sit in with them."

"What have they had to say?" the marshal asked.

"They just got there; Mr. Nesmith is on his way down from home."

Steve and Smoky went along with him. It was a sober group that awaited them in the lawyer's office. Nesmith arrived a moment after they got there.

"Sorry to drag you down here when you ain't feelin' well," Taylor said apologetically.

"That's all r i g h t," Nesmith snapped. "From what I hear, this is important enough to get a man out of bed. Steve, you saw and heard it all. Tell me about it."

Gant recounted what had occurred on the courthouse steps, and when he had finished with that, gave his opinion of how the steal had been arranged. Taylor, Cass and the others took up the threads of the story and expressed themselves violently and at great length. Knowing old Jed, they realized he was not impressed with their chances of obtaining any redress.

"It is an accomplished fact that Mart Ducker now has title to that land," he said. "In law, that's important. I believe as you do that there was collusion between Ducker and Necker. But, gentlemen, that will be almost impossible to prove. If we start an action and put Necker on the witness stand he'll protest his innocence and disclaim any knowledge of a plot to shut you out of the Reserve. We could undoubtedly prove him unfit to hold his office. But removing him would not solve your problem."

"But these sales have to be conducted accordin' to law!" Southard argued hotly. "The notices were not posted in public places!"

"Cass, you and every officer of your Association were present at the sale, along with fifty others. The League would establish that fact as proof that news of the sale had had wide circulation." Nesmith shook his white head firmly. "Don't count on that point to help us. And, of course, no one has been shut out of the Red Bluffs Reserve as yet. I know you won't be able to drive in next May. Ducker would deny any such intention at the present time, however, and our case would fall apart."

"Well, what do you advise?" Thad demanded. "We just can't wait for spring to roll around to discover that we're helpless!"

"I appreciate that," old Jed flared back irascibly, "but I'm not going to go through the motions of doing something just to buck up your confidence, when I know it'll fail in the end. Some other lawyer may advise you to engage in a long and costly legal battle with the Drovers' League. I refuse to do it. Until we can prove that Ducker has actually barred us from entering the Reserve, we have no case. Even when we have such evidence there's little likelihood of our bing able to have the sale set aside, or of compelling the Secretary of the Interior to order Ducker to give us a right-of-way. After you have acquired your grazing permits in the spring, and you find yourself blocked off, you could petition the Secretary. Any relief you got from him would be a long time coming, and it's my belief he would do nothing at all."

MEN like Thad Taylor and Southard were not easily discouraged, but they sat there helpless and bewildered.

"I know this is hard to take," Nesmith told them. "Through the years, I've always given it to you straight from the shoulder; this is no time to change that policy."

"Mr. Nesmith, would it be impudent of me to say a word?" Randy asked. Jed glared at him from under his frosty brows.

"Certainly not! I'd be surprised if you didn't have something to say. What is it?"

"I think this is a matter for the county to settle. The land Ducker acquired is now privately owned. It will be assessed and put on the tax roll. On the recommendation of the county commissioners the district attorney can institute a suit to condemn a road from Ute Crossing to the boundary of the Red Bluff Reserve."

"Hunh! We'll never skin this pig that way!" Jim Emory growled. "With the set-up we've got across the street, we wouldn't get anywhere!"

"Jim, it's the setup that's wrong, not Randy," Nesmith declared pointedly. "I could sit here the rest of the day and I wouldn't be able to give you a better suggestion. Get rid of Ogilvie and Evers; either you or Thad go out for Dalyrimple's place on the board. It's three weeks before the county convention meets; you can whip up support enough in that time to name candidates who'll go down the line against Ducker. You can count on my support at the convention."

It stirred a faint hope in Cass and the others. But they were skeptical.

"It sounds all right," Southard said without enthusiasm. "When you've got your back to the wall, it don't seem like much to lean on. Dalyrimple's been runnin' the politics of this county a long time; bein' a banker, and most of us owin' him money, it won't be easy to upset him."

Jed banged his desk. "I say to hell with Nate Dalyrimple! He's responsible for Ogilvie and Evers and the economic troubles on this range! Throw him out! You men used to know how to fight!"

It was just the sort of ringing challenge they needed to stir them to action. Emory questioned the sheriff.

"Before this trouble started, Smoky, you let it be known that you wouldn't run again. Are you sticking to that?"

"I've had the office a long time," the sheriff answered. "I'd like to hang up my guns and call it a day. But I can't do it if you figger I'll be any help to you."

"Get that nonsense out of your head," Nesmith snapped. "You know we need you."

"How about yourself?" Guthrie queried. "Will you stand for district judge?"

Old Jed shook his head. "My health won't permit it. Throw your support to Colton Shaw or Pliny Cutbill; they're both honest men. Colton might be your best bet; he can carry Encino and the southern part of the county for you. Mart Ducker will be the only issue in the campaign. If you want to solidify the feeling against him, nominate this young man for district attorney. I've seen enough of him in the several months he's been associated with me to tell you he's a fine, upstanding young lawyer."

RANDY was overwhelmed by such praise from him. "I don't know whether I deserve such a compliment as that or not, Mr. Nesmith," he said in his embarrassment. "If I do, it's only because of your patience with me."

"Drivel!" the old man responded gruffly and without softening for a moment. "You can give a young fellow advice but you can't put brains in his head. You had the stuff, or I wouldn't have bothered with you."

It was a proud and happy moment for Steve when Southard and the rest signified their agreement with old Jed's ambitious plans for Randy. That those plans could be carried into effect and Dalyrimple's hold on the party broken was something that only time could prove. He knew the opposition would center its fire on the youngster, ridiculing his youth and inexperience. Somehow, he felt it wouldn't be enough to stop Randy; partisan feeling would run high; a vote for him would be a vote against Ducker. As Nesmith had said, that would be the real issue.

"Since our backs are to the wall and this is our only chance, we'll tear that convention up by the roots!" Taylor rapped. The fight had come back to him and he was a different man with the bit in his teeth again. "Everyone of us is a delegate. There must be a couple dozen others in

town today. Let's git out on the street and start countin' noses."

"That's a good idea," Southard agreed. "There can't be any straddlin' the fence about this; a man is either for us, or he's against us!"

"I'd go even stronger than that," Nesmith advised. "Drive it home that they're either for you, or for the League. Don't try to keep your activities a secret; let Dalyrimple have something to worry about."

They filed out and Steve and Guthrie went along with them.

"This puts all the eggs in one basket," Smoky declared as they walked back to his office. "This is goin' to give Rita a chance to crow. There won't be no livin' in the same house with her."

Steve Gant didn't have to be told how important the move that was now under way could prove to be. He felt he had more riding on it than anyone else. But success at the polls in November might come too late to save Jeff from some rash act. Election Day was better than two months away.

"It's a long time to go," he thought. "If Frank Starr's out there, he'll be organizing something big. Jeff may not be able to keep out of it."

"Did you say somethin'?" Smoky asked, seeing Steve's lips move.

"No, just thinking," was the woodden answer.

CHAPTER XV

Honor of the Law Badge

STEVE waited ten days after dispatching a letter to Ben Stillings, his brother marshal of Utah, for a reply to his query regarding Yampa Jackson's presence in the wild, V-shaped stretch of broken plains and wasteland stretching down from the Denver and Rio Grand Railroad to where the Green and Grand Rivers unite to form the mighty Colorado. Not getting an answer, he took a train to Salt Lake City, and Honey Hanks went with him.

Stillings and he were old friends and, in many ways, cut from the same pattern.

"I've been waiting from day to day, hoping I'd have some news for you, Steve," Ben said, as they shook hands. "I don't have to tell you it's a tough job to put your finger on a man in that country. I've contacted every peace officer from Vernal south. If Jackson is down there, he's making himself hard to find."

Gant expressed his disappointment.

"According to the ticket on him, Jackson's wanted for killing Indian Joe Gains, which was a favor to the world at large," Stillings observed shrewdly. "Ordinarily, you wouldn't be bothering too much about anything like that. Have you got a better reason, Steve?" The latter nodded.

"Jackson is one of the pair that killed my old man. I'm not saying anything about it, Ben. I want him locked up and put where he'll keep before I do."

"Somebody interested in stopping him from talking?"

"Yeh!"

Stillings mulled it over for a second. "I guess we don't have to mention his name. If you and Honey want to do some riding, I'll go along with you. We can take the train back to Green River and get horses there. It'll take us about ten days to make the big swing back and forth between the rivers. For reasons of my own, I won't mind spending the time. I know there's something stirring down there. I can't tell you what it is, but I sensed it the last time I stopped off in Green River. A couple things I've picked up since then have confirmed my feeling about it. For one thing, there's been too much riff-raff drifting into that country lately."

"When the tick birds begin to gather it's usually because they see something ahead on which to feed," Steve phisolophized. "Are they hanging out in Green River?"

"Only for a day or two, and then they fade away to the east. They may be following the Grand over into your bailiwick."

Gant was interested. "Let's get down there and see what we can find."

For twelve gruelling days Stillings, Honey and he toiled through the brown cliffs and wind-carved sandstone monuments, down in the land of blinding white sunshine and incredible distances, where, in the blue haze, rivers flow under natural bridges and the quicksands wait to trap the unwary. They talked with men in the little towns of Green River, Bluff and Moab, at trading-posts unmarked on any map. These men were neutrals, non-combatants in the war between the law and those who were outside it. According to their lights, they were honest men, who sought only to gain immunity for themselves from the desperados and blacklegs with whom they dwelt by seeing nothing and saying nothing.

But if the men who had lingered in Green River and the other towns for a few hours before fading from sight were still in the country, they had become as elusive as ghosts. The marshals saw nothing of them, and they discovered no trace of Yampa Jackson.

GANT and Honey returned to Silver City with their tempers edged with a keen sense of failure. The former found a letter from Rita awaiting him. It had been on his desk for three days.

"I hope you'll be able to come up a day or two before the convention meets," she wrote. "That'll be on the ninth. I'm not asking you to do any campaigning, but just being here will have a good influence. Father and Randy say it's going to be uncomfortably close. As you perhaps are aware, Mart Ducker has been here repeatedly trying to bribe his way to victory. Judge Ogilvie and his other henchmen are very busy. They seem to be plentifully supplied with money.

"It's a real fight, and I haven't lost faith for a moment in our ability to smash Dalyrimple's ring. I enclose an editorial from the Gazette. You can see that we have the paper with us."

To be in the Mesa on the 9th Steve had to leave Silver City that afternoon. He came face to face with Mart Ducker on the train. Ducker was confident.

"You're pretty smooth, Gant," he asserted insolently. "But you don't fool me; I know you've spearheaded all the trouble I've had in the Mesa. I'll hand you a licking tomorrow that'll make your crowd crawl into its shell."

Steve looked him over with a challenging eye. "They say it's foolish to count your chickens before they're hatched, Mart. I reckon that goes for votes as well as chickens."

"Yeh?" Ducker retorted. "Maybe you'll be a little wiser by tomorrow evening!"

On arriving in the Mesa, Gant went to Nesmith's office. Randy was there with Jed. Ducker's predictions drew a snort of disgust from the old man. "We'll light a bombshell under him tomorrow! Keep this under your hat, Steve: Nat Dalyrimple came to see me last night. He's ready to toss Ducker overboard. As soon as the convention is called to order and we begin to show our strength, he'll try to climb on the bandwagon. But we don't need him. There's been some last-minute switches to our side and we'll nominate our ticket without having to make any deal with him. There's really only one party in this county; the men nominated tomorrow will be elected."

Steve grinned. "You sound pretty sure, Jed. Are you cocky about it too, Randy?"

"I don't think we'll lose," was the temperate answer. "The last two or three days have shown which way the wind is blowing. A week ago, we weren't so confident."

"That's what I gathered from Rita's letter. I haven't seen her or Smoky yet. If you have a little time this evening, drop over to the house."

Thad Taylor and his cohorts began to arrive in town early the following morning. Steve had never seen them more determined. He spoke to a number. They seemed grateful for his presence.

For want of a more suitable place the county conventions were held in the Methodist church. After the delegates filed in, he stood outside with

a crowd that congregated about the door and overflowed to the church lawn. The windows were open and the proceedings within were anything but secret. In fact, the deliberations of the delegates were applauded or booed as vociferously as though the excited crowd was taking part in the proceedings.

It was all over by noon. From top to bottom the insurgents swept to victory. Dalyrimple made a belated attempt to switch his support to them, but it was neither needed nor wanted.

In his hotel room, where he had kept in touch with every move, Ducker received word of his defeat. A crowd gathered outside the Star and howled its pleasure. It touched off a celebration such as Broken Mesa had not enjoyed in years.

STEVE and Guthrie were seated in the sheriff's office when Rita and Randy came in. She was beaming and Randy was too happy to hide the fact.

"We're in, Steve!" she cried gaily. "Meet our next district attorney, Mr. Randolph Gant!"

"You're not even going to wait for the votes to be counted on November second, eh?" he responded banteringly. "It might be a good idea, Rita, to hold off on the cheering until that formality has been attended to. Ducker's been licked, but it'll take a lot of licking to finish him."

"He's lost a lot more than political control of this county," Randy spoke up, his mood suddenly sober. "He'll discover the truth of that when Colton Shaw takes over the district court and I move into the D. A.'s office."

Steve realized that the set-back Ducker had received today could lead to his complete defeat. There was reason to hope it would, but he was not ready to take such a completely optimistic stand.

"Your success will place a heavy responsibility on you," he said.

Randy nodded grimly. "I'm aware of that, Steve. The first thing I'll do will be to get Jeff to come in and give himself up. I'll ask for extradition on Buck Hanna and Zuber. It's not only my opinion but Mr. Nesmith's that Jeff will be acquitted before the case is given to the jury."

It was heartening talk to the marshal's ears. But he told himself that time was still the arch enemy that could defeat all their plans.

Even then Evers' term would have two months to go. Steve didn't intend to wait that long; once Randy had been officially elected, he was determined to bring Jeff in.

A boy came up from the railroad station with a telegram for him, as they sat there. It contained startling news. Steve read it and tossed it across the desk to Smoky.

"There it is, I reckon!" he declared, his voice heavy with dismay. "The railroads and Wells Fargo have been saying for a month that Frank Starr was in Brown's Park. You remember what Tom Burke had to say to Honey about it."

"Yeh," Guthrie growled. "This is the kind of a job Starr would pull. But he ain't got no copyright on it. Wild Bill or the Deadwood Kid could have figgered this one out."

A Union Pacific train had been stuck-up at Table Rock and twelve thousand dollars taken from the express car. Five masked men had boarded the train as it was pulling out of the little Wyoming town and climbed over the coal tender to order the engineer to stop a mile west of the town. The telegram bore Marshal Rip Early's signature. The famous old warhorse, the dean of federal marshals in the Rock Mountain States, had arrived at the scene of the hold-up several hours after it occurred.

"I'm going up there," Steve announced. "I'll hop a D. and R. G. freight as far as Dora and catch something on the Short Line there. It'll put me in Table Rock by evening."

"Why are you so concerned about this?" Randy asked innocently. "It's not in your jurisdiction."

"I'm concerned; we'll let it go at that." It wasn't only his fear that Frank Starr was responsible for the robbery that tightened his mouth. "If anything comes from Honey or Kil-

lian, forward it to me up there!" he called back as he hurried through the door.

IN TABLE ROCK he was greeted with the news that the bandits had been cornered on the Padlock ranch, twenty-five miles north of town by the posse Marshal Early had quickly organized. A Government mail carrier claimed he had heard heard sounds of a big battle there. Gant got a horse and enlisted a cowpuncher to guide him to the Padlock. When he got there, the fight was all over. Early had four of the five bandits handcuffed together. A stiffening shape draped over a pack-horse accounted for the fifth man. Frank Starr was not one of them, nor was Jeff. The Deadwood Kid had bossed this job.

"I was lucky this time," Early told Steve. "I knew when they started heading to the north that it was a feint. I just waited for them to make their swing south. They rode right into our hands."

Over the years it had been Gant's experience that luck had very little to do with Rip Early's successful exploits. "Looks like the companies were wrong, Rip," he said. "I came up here thinking that Frank Starr had broken loose. If he were in the Park, he'd have been in on this."

"Undoubtedly. But you'll see Wells Fargo and the railroads put the heat on us now. We'll have to go into the Park before snow flies. It's dumb, I know, but you'll never make them believe it.

Soon after the posse returned to Table Rock with the prisoners, Early flagged an east-bound express. He accepted Steve's offer to accompany him to Rawlins, where the four bandits were to be lodged in the Carbon County jail. Deadwood and the other captives accepted their plight with stoic indifference. The Kid was the only one of the four with whom Steve had any previous acquaintance. In the ninety-minute ride to Rawlins he caught the obscure interest with which the pint-sized outlaw was studying him. He surmised that it sprung from the fact that he was Jeff's brother. When Early went to the water cooler Deadwood got his chance to say what was on his mind.

"How did you happen to show up in Table Rock?" he questioned.

Steve understood him at once. "Rip wired me in Broken Mesa after you boys pulled the job. Nobody connected with me did any talking, Kid. You've got my word for that!"

The Kid nodded. "I just wanted to be sure."

Gant was back in Silver City twenty-four hours later. For the rest of the week he figuratively crossed his fingers every time a telegram was brought into the office. The tension he was under did not escape Honey and Killian. The former could finally hold in no longer.

"You're tying yourself into knots about something, Steve. What is it?"

"Just one thing and another," was the evasive answer. "I know things are coming to a head in the Mesa. The second of November can't roll around too soon for me."

This was perfectly true, and in more ways than one. In view of the affair at Table Rock he was convinced that Rip Early's prediction that the railroad and express companies would not be satisfied with anything less than an all-out drive on Brown's Park yet that fall would be borne out. Each day that passed without bringing the call to a conference in Denver he began to count as a day gained. It would take two weeks to organize such an expedition and get it into position to close in. His fervent hope was that Election Day would have come and gone before his hand was forced.

FOUR days later, however, a wire came from the Governor asking his presence at a conference in Denver. There, he found Marshals Early and Stillings, together with heads of the detective departments of Wells Fargo and the railroads.

Governor Waite exhibited the communication he had received from Washington empowering him to call the meeting and enlist the support of the various federal marshals in a

united invasion of Brown's Park. Almost with the first word the conferees found themselves sharply divided, the three marshals standing together and opposing the plan as unfeasible, if not unwise, and the company men taking the other side.

"Force of numbers won't turn the trick, Governor," Marshal Early argued. "They'll know we're coming. They're familiar with every foot of that country. There's a score of places where they can fort up, and if we don't turn back they'll pick off every man who shows his face. If by a miracle we should get them on the run, they'll just drop across the Green and line out for parts unknown in Utah, and we'll have the whole thing to do over again. You can't put down outlawry that way!"

Tom Burke was ready with his objections. Stillings soon cut him off.

"The best proof that you railroad men were wrong lies in the fact that you wouldn't dream of undertaking this round-up on your own hook. It's not a question of nerve alone, Tom; you've seen the fringe of that country from a car window, and you know it would take five hundred men to throw a noose around it that would plug all the holes. I wouldn't do you the injustice of thinking this idea originated with any of you men; this is something the heads of your companies cooked up."

The governor turned to Steve. "What have you got to say about it, Mr. Gant? You know Brown's Park."

"It's the sixteenth of October, sir. That's pretty late to be undertaking anything like this. Figure a week to get ready and another week to begin closing in on the Park and you're up to the first of November. That's taking a chance on the weather; we're apt to run into snow. But we're only talking around the barrel; I realize that you're just as much on the spot as we are and that you'll have to send us in. I'll endeavor to hold up my end."

Governor Waite gave him an approving nod. "You've stated the case perfectly, Marshal. You men work out your plans and let me know when you can begin moving."

Reluctantly, Rip Early took charge of the session that followed. He was to rendezvous with his deputies and Union Pacific detectives at Rock Springs and come in across the Red Desert. Stillings was to gather his forces at Vernal and strike east. In Colorado, Steve was to lead his contingent from Broken Mesa, cross the Organ Mountains and follow the general line of the Williams and Yampa Rivers out across Routt County.

HE arrived in the Mesa two days later, accompanied by his deputies. When he began engaging saddle stock and pack horses and purchasing supplies, it was impossible to keep the purpose of all this a secret.

"If people didn't know about it now, they would when Burke gits here with a bunch of men," Smoky told him. He had no regrets over not taking part in the expedition. He didn't give it better than one chance in five of succeeding. Steve agreed with him, but even such odds brought him no comfort. It wasn't only the fear that Jeff might be snagged that weighed on him; there was every reason to expect a violent gun-fight. Jeff would surely stand by the hardened men with whom he had found safety.

A political rally was held in town. Steve attended. Colton Shaw came up from Encino and made a rousing speech; Randy followed with a convincing talk. Their election seemed assured. The marshal's enthusiasm was tempered by dread of the tragic consequences that could stem out of the undertaking on which he was about to embark. It occurred to him more than once that it would be a simple matter to send word to Jeff through Nap Dumont. He fought off the temptation, knowing his days as a marshal would be over if he took that step. The world might never know; but he would, and he could no longer wear the badge.

With Dumont so often in his thoughts, it shook him to have the Frenchman ride into town early one

evening in search of him. He came to the house and called him outside.

"I don't want you to ask no question, Steve," he began mysteriously. "Git a horse and come with me. You hear somethin' tonight dat change some of your plan."

"Yeh?" Gant replied suspiciously. "Where do we go, Nap?"

"I tell you after we leave town. We go alone, just you and me." When Steve hesitated, Dumont had only to add a sentence to whip him into line. "You want to grab Yampa Jackson, eh?"

"If you can promise me anything like that, I'll go!" Gant rasped. "Which way do we ride?"

"North."

"Okay! You meet me on the road. I'll be along in a few minutes."

They were ten miles north of the Mesa before Nap told him their destination was the lonely little junction at Dora, where Buck Hanna and his pals had been put aboard the freight train.

It was well after midnight when they reached the spot. Dumont turned away from the litle depot and rode into a fringe of trees beyond. A man stepped out of the shadows.

"Steve, is that you?" he asked. It wrung a startled gasp from the marshal.

"Jeff! Are you mad, coming here?"

"I had to see you. We can sit here and talk a minute. What I've got to say won't keep. I figured it was so mportant I had to take this chance . . . Won't you step down? You don't have to put on the ice like that."

Steve Gant's face was hard and rocky as he got out of his saddle. In some ways it was the toughest moment of his life.

"You shouldn't have done this, no matter how important what you've got to say turns out to be. You know there's nothing I wouldn't do for you, Jeff. But I can't go back on my oath. I know you're innocent, but you're a wanted man. Where do you think that leaves me? What do you expect me to do but take you into custody?"

"Steve, mebbe I can feex dat," Nap got out coolly. "Just turn around a little bit."

The marshal turned to find a gun levelled at him. "You're making a mistake, Dumont!" he growled.

"Just unbuckle your gun-belt and let him drop," Nap purred. "Go ahead!" There was nothing for the marshal to do but oblige. "Dat's good judgment, Steve. Is time now for Ducker to be ship his Mex herder back home. Be about hunderd fifty this time. Each one have mebbe two, t'ree hunderd dollar in his pocket. Dat's 'bout forty-five t'ousand dollar altogether. Frank Starr is goin' stick up dat train in La Paz sidin'. Dose fella you and Stillings don't find down in Utah will be dere. One of dem is Yampa. Now you sit down; Jeff will tell you all about it."

CHAPTER SVI

The Chips Are Down

IT WAS A startling story Jeff Gant had to tell. Steve listened with rapt attention. The unexpected meeting with his brother, the eerie loneliness of this deep gorge in the mountains, where the snows clung to the hillsides for nine months of the year, combined to give it sheer drama.

Several times he had seen the special train, carrying the League's Mexican herders back home, leave Silver City for the south. By the end of October each year, the shearing had been completed and the wool clip either stored or shipped. The sheep had been brought down from the high places and quartered for the winter. Ducker had no further need of herders until the following spring. For three or four days before they were paid off, the Mexicans would begin to come into Silver City. As Dumont had said, each one of them had at least three hundred dollars due him; lumped together, it made a sizable sum. Fearing a hold-up Ducker's paymaster always doled out the money under heavy guard. That it had occurred to a seasoned bandit like Frank Starr that it would be a

comparatively easy matter to stick-up the special as it lay on the siding at La Paz, twelve miles south of Silver City, waiting for Number 7 to pass, was easy to believe. The unguarded train and its unsuspecting, care-free passengers looked like easy pickings.

"Where did Starr pick up all these details, Jeff? This is the first time he's showed his face in Colorado."

"I never heard him say, but he isn't the first man who's thought of it. I've heard enough to know a lot of the boys have turned the idea over in their minds. When Starr showed up and tried to sell them on it, they wouldn't give him a tumble."

"Why not, Jeff?"

"Because they'd figured out long ago that it would take fifteen to twenty men to pull that job. It wouldn't mean a big cut for anybody. That's one reason. But there's an even better one; nobody but a fool is going into anything that would leave that many tongues hanging around to start wagging if someone got picked up. Starr wouldn't see it that way. I don't have to mention any names but I can tell you there was a row when he kept on yapping about it, and he was run out of the Park. He lit out for Vernal and then dropped down across the Ute Reservation. For a month, he's been gathering a gang of his own. They're plenty tough, but they're just range scum that an honest-to-God owlhoot wouldn't ride with. They're ready to go overboard for him because he's Frank Starr. The reason you and Stillings and Honey didn't see anything of them, when you worked that country between the Grand and Green, was because you were looking in the wrong place; they're in Colorado, rendezvousing in the Cathedral Peaks."

"Dat puts dose fella within 'bout fifty mile of La Paz," Nap spoke up. "Good cover most of de way, Steve."

The marshal was familiar with that country. "You're positive Jackson is in the bunch?" he asked grimly.

"Absolutely! He's Starr's right-hand man! And listen to this, Steve: word has got around about this drive you and Early and Stillings are going to make. They know all about it and they're tickled stiff; they figure all of you will be out of the way and they'll have easy sailing. As for Brown's Park, you know what you'll find when you get there. Some deserted cabins; that's all. You can burn them down and give the boys the job of putting up new ones when they come back. That's about all you'll accomplish."

STEVE studied him with a sober face for a minute. "You know your friends are confirmed outlaws, wanted for half a hundred crimes. I expect you to have some sympathy for them, but I hate to see you putting yourself on their side of the fence."

"Why shouldn't I?" Jeff demanded thinly. "They took me in when a couple rat-faced deputy sheriffs tried to snag me to get that reward money. I ran in the first place because I couldn't get a square deal from the law. I was up in Wind River Basin, working on a ranch and hurting nobody, when that pair spotted me. Before I could turn around, the whole pack was after me. I was damned glad to hang my hat in Brown's Park! I can thank Nap for that, and I'll never forget it!"

Steve nodded charitably. "I can understand your slant. Randy and I have been breaking our necks to make it possible for you to come back and have a clean slate. I hope you haven't done anything to stand in the way of that."

Jeff shook his head. "If I were to tell you some of the advice that's been given me against going hog wild, you might find it hard to believe."

"I don't know that I would," said Steve. "I've found the good and bad pretty well scrambled in most men. You won't have to sit it out much longer, Jeff. Whatever happens at La Paz siding, I'll come back with Yampa Jackson. . . Do you know that Randy's been nominated for district attorney?"

"Yeh, Nap's been keeping me informed. I heard what happened to

Buck Hanna and his ratty pals. It seems that some things work out all right."

He asked about Rita and Smoky. Ducker's scheme to close off the Reserve held his complete interest. The minutes fled as they sat there, with Nap putting in an occasional word. In the distance, an engine blew for the junction.

"I'll grab that train," Jeff said, as a westbound freight pulled in. "I don't want to tell you how to handle that business at La Paz, Steve, but it's a cinch the gang will head back to the Cathedral Peaks when they start running. There'll be somebody there to turn them back. Just remember that."

Steve stopped him when he started down the slope to the tracks. "Jeff, if Randy or I get word to you through Nap, asking you to come in and give yourself up, will you do it? Smoky will have to lock you up until you come up for arraignment. Nesmith agrees with us that that's as far as it will go and you'll be given your freedom."

"Well, that'll be something to think about if the kid gets elected. Even then it'll be a couple months before Evers' term ends." His tone was frankly skeptical. Steve didn't like it.

"When we send word to you we'll know what we're doing. Randy will win. When the returns are counted, Jesse Evers will toss in the sponge. You've got my word for it that it'll be safe. Haven't you got confidence enough in me to believe it?"

"Would I have met you here if I didn't have confidence in you?" Jeff answered. "I've had a tough time of it, Steve; I just want to be sure I'm not making another mistake. I've got to run now. So long! And much obliged, Nap!"

The marshal and Dumont got back on their broncs.

"Don't let the fact that you pulled a gun on me and got away with it go to your head," Steve told the Frenchman. "Don't ever try to make anything of it."

Nap laughed. "Bagosh, Steve, you are a tough fella to git along with! Mebbe dat's why I like you. Let's go!"

IT WAS long after daylight when Gant rode into the Mesa. He had resolved to say nothing to Randy about his meeting with Jeff. As he told Smoky, saying anything to his brother could accomplish no purpose right now, other than to take his mind off the campaign.

"What do you propose to do?" the sheriff asked with his usual directness, when Steve had given him a complete account of the meeting at Dora. "You can't go through with the plans you've been makin'. On the other hand, it's goin' to put you in a bad spot and call for a lot of explanations if you back out."

"I'm going to go right on getting everything set for the drive," Steve declared firmly. "Burke will be here with his men day after tomorrow. I'll be ready, but I'm not going to Brown's Park. I'll make a bluff at it. When we get to Salt Springs, I'm pulling away, and I'm taking Honey and Killian with me and slipping back to Silver City. I'm going to ask you to take up the slack for me. I want you to go in my place and head this end of the drive. It'll be tough going, but I'm willing to take Jeff's word for it that you won't find anyone out there."

"Wal," Smoky declared dubiously, "I don't like to lead a posse across Routt County. Jack Shively may figger that, seein' as how it's his county, he ought to be put in charge."

Steve refused to take the objection seriously. "You and Shively are good friends. When you reach Deep Creek you can send word to him and explain the situation. Get him to go along with you."

"All right, as a favor to you, I'll do it. Tom Burke may gum things up for you. That's a D. and R. G. train those Mexicans will be ridin'; he may figger it's up to him to handle that end and insist that you head for the Park and tend to your knittin'."

"Burke's job will be safe for another year if we can grab Frank Starr. I'll do some plain talking to him."

Burke arrived in the Mesa on

schedule with ten men, some of them railroad detectives and the others ex-policemen that he had recruited in Denver. When he learned what Gant had in mind, he took the very stand Guthrie had predicted.

"Listen, Tom," Steve argued, "you'll get the credit for this; I'll need some help from the railroad. You can arrange for it, but I don't want you to go to La Paz. I insist on handling this thing quietly, and in my own way. If I try to show up with a big bunch of men, it'll scare Starr off. The smart thing for you to do is to go into the Park with Smoky just as we planned. You should be out of here over a week—eight days from this evening, to be exact—when the special pulls out of Silver City. If you show up there or stall around in the meantime, a wise gent like Starr is going to start asking himself questions; you can be sure he's got someone watching us."

Burke did not question Gant about the source of his information on the hold-up; in his years as a railroad detective he had often got his own tips in mysterious ways. The marshal was purposely vague about who Starr was supposed to have with him, identifying them only as a hastily recruited bunch of unknowns.

"It may be the smart way to play it for me to be caught out in Routt County when a major holdup is pulled on one of our trains, but it ain't going to sound that way to our general manager when the news hits Denver," Burke observed skeptically. "I don't care what you have to say about it, when it's all over, Steve; he's apt to get the idea that the road can get along without my services. These big executives are funny that way."

"If you leave that part of it to me, Tom, you won't have anything to worry about," Steve insisted. "As I told you, I'll have to have some help from the D. and R. G. You can handle that from here by telegraph."

He explained what he had in mind. It satisfied the detective.

Burke communicated with the division manager, and Gant went ahead with his preparations for the expedition. On Friday morning, it was ready to leave the Mesa. Randy called Steve aside for a farewell word.

"The campaign will be over long before I see you again," he said. "I don't know what Ducker can do to upset us now; he certainly can't vote his Mexicans."

"Don't take anything for granted with him," Steve advised. "If he can stuff the ballot boxes or give you a short count, he'll do it."

RANDY nodded. "We'll be looking for something like that." He hesitated a moment. "Steve, you haven't mentioned it, but has it occurred to you that you may find Jeff in your net?"

"Don't worry about that," his brother answered quietly. "There isn't a chance of that happening, Randy. I know what I'm talking about. You go ahead and win; that's all I want you to do."

He and Smoky rode out of town at the head of the posse. That evening, in Salt Springs, he and his deputy marshals slipped away and caught a train that put them in Silver City early the following morning. There, for three days, they remained under cover. Gant knew where to contact several men who had proved their worth in similar circumstances in the past. They answered his call.

"Six of us going to be enough?" Honey asked, when they came in. "We can just about figure out how Starr will play his cards. He'll have a couple men cover the engine crew and send at least two or three into each of three cars at the same time. He'll want to get it over with in a hurry."

"That's exactly the way I see it," Steve agreed. "When he gets his men divided and they go to work, we'll bust loose. As soon as it gets dark, we'll drift out of town tonight, one at a time, and wait this out at Chick Grannan's ranch, south of town. The special will stop there for us. We'll put our horses in the baggage car and get in with them. Starr will put up a fight, but I know we can handle this job."

"What about Yampa?" Killian questioned. "There's going to be some shooting. You want him alive."

"That's the tough end of it," Steve answered grimly. "We can't call our shots, with things happening quickly. If it's a dark night, we won't know who we're facing. But that's the chance we've got to take. Our first job is to foil the holdup. If Jackson goes down, that'll be my hard luck!"

CHAPTER XVII

Flaming Guns

THE SPECIAL rattled over a piece of new roadbed and the dust sucked down into the baggage car through the ventilators; the horses, already nervous in their strange quarters, began to cough and sneeze.

Matt Lancaster, the spindly-shanked, white-haired baggageman had barricaded himself behind some trunks in the end of the car nearest the tender. He knew what they were going to run into, for Gant had found it necessary to take the train crew into his confidence.

"Another five miles and we'll be at the siding," Killian announced. He slipped a clip of cartridges into the chamber of his rifle. "I know you've got a lot riding on this business tonight, Steve. I hope it works out your way."

Gant's mouth moved in a faint smile. "I hope it works out for all of us, Flint. We've smelled a lot of gunsmoke in the four years we've been together. That part of it won't be anything new, but, as you say, I've got a lot riding on this personally. In the last two days I haven't been able to think of much else."

He had carefully mapped out every step they were to take from the moment Starr and his gang descended on the train. It left a great deal to chance, however, and he was quick to realize it.

"Turk, you and Merle and Erling have been out with us before," he said, addressing the three men who were serving as special deputies. "I don't have to tell you that your safety comes first with me. You've got the law behind you; if you have to shoot, shoot to kill."

"We'll be okay if they don't cross us up by trying to bust into this car on the chance there may be something in the safe," Honey spoke up. "They'll leave their horses in the trees and come up on the right side of the train, so when Number 7 rolls by her headlight won't pick 'em up. I'll take care of whoever's putting the bee on the engine crew; don't the rest of you worry about that. I predict most of this bunch will hightail it back to their broncs as soon as the lead begins to fly. When we get through here we'll have a running fight on our hands that will carry all the way to the Peaks."

Steve was in no mood to indulge in further speculations. When he felt the engineer begin to apply the air, he said softly: "We're there."

A brakeman ran ahead and opened the switch and the special moved on to the siding. Even through the closed doors of the car, Steve and the others could hear the Mexicans singing to the accompaniment of several guitars and shouting gaily to one another, all unaware of what the next few seconds were going to bring.

THE attack came quickly. The light four-car train had no more than ground to a stop, when a dozen scattered shots racketed through the stillness of the night, the slugs ploughing into the sides of the wooden coaches. The cries of the frightened herders rose in a shrill crescendo. Up ahead, a hoarse voice ordered the engineer and fireman to climb down from the cab.

Steve rolled the door open a few inches and stuck out his head. Looking back along the train he could see the bandits swinging up the steps of the day coaches. The light streaming from the car windows revealed half a dozen others posted along side the train, their rifles trained on the windows. They were so sure of success

that they hadn't bothered to mask their faces.

The siding lay at the bottom of a ten-foot slope. The gang had obviously left their horses in the brush at the top. Gant told himself it was a tactical mistake they were likely to regret.

"Git yore head in there, Lancaster, and shut that door, if yuh don't want to git busted!" someone yelled, mistaking him for the baggageman.

The challenge came from the direction of the engine. Steve jerked back but left the door open, hoping it would draw the man and make things easier for Honey. It was only a second before he heard the cinders crunching under angry footsteps outside. The car was in darkness and the man peered in through the opening.

"I ain't tellin' yuh twice to git this door shut! This is a hold-up, yuh old fool! What yuh got in there yo're so worried about?"

"An express package," Steve muttered.

"Hand it out, then!"

Steve picked up the first thing he could find. When the bandit reached out for it he clubbed him over the head with his gun barrel. The man crumpled up without even a strangled cry of surprise.

The rails on the main-line track were humming already. From the south came a shrill, warning whistle from Number 7. A few seconds later her headlight cut a white slice through the night's blackness. At fifty miles an hour, the express roared past the siding. The shower of cinders it kicked up were still falling on the roof of the baggage car when Honey opened the door on the other side and dropped to the ground. He was around the engine before Gant and the others could pile out. As planned, they dropped to their hands and knees and crawled under the car to the right side of the train. With their presence undiscovered, they trained their guns on the men who were covering the operation inside the coaches. The Mexicans were in a panic. One of them tried to leap through a window. A slug clipped his hair and changed his mind in a hurry. Up ahead, two guns coughed almost simultaneously. Someone came running, then.

"Open up on 'em!" Steve ordered. "Let 'em know we're here!"

THE chattering blast of gunfire they sent crashing down the side of the train caught Starr's men flat-footed. Short of the top of the embankment, there was no cover they could seek. Standing where they were, they were an easy target, and they knew it. One or two flattened out on the ground and began to answer the fire being directed at them. The others made a wild dash up the slope. Some of them made it; two rolled back down and lay kicking on the gravel.

The man, who had come running from the engine, was Honey Hanks. "Come on!" he cried. "They're busting for their broncs, just as I told you! When the rest of 'em come tumbling out of the coaches we can knock 'em off like they were clay pigeons!"

"Get under here and start throwing lead into that brush up there!" Steve barked. "If we can stampede their horses and set half of this gang on foot we can settle their hash without chasing them half-way across the state!"

He believed Starr and at least five others had entered the coaches. He felt it was at least an even chance that Yampa was one of them, for it seemed unlikely to him that Yampa would have turned tail and run, as the half a dozen had who had been left on guard. In any event, he knew the fight was a long way from being over.

Scattered shots came from the coaches now. But no one rushed out. Fearing Starr and his men might slip away on the other side of the train, he moved Killian and Turk Beamer over to prevent such a move. As soon as they were in position, they began spattering the coach steps with slugs.

"There they go!" Honey cried. "That's the horses breaking through

the scrub! We got the rest of this outfit up a tree!"

Starr evidently realized what had happened, for he and the men who remained with him suddenly appeared on the coach steps and emptied their guns at Killian and Beamer. Staking everything on the desperate chance that they could shake off pursuit, even without horses, if they could reach the broken hills to the east, they leaped off the steps and dashed across the tracks.

Flint Killian's sharp cry brought Steve and Honey in a hasty scramble. "They just legged it across the tracks!" he told them. "They're down in that gulch over there. Turk dropped one of them but he got up." Killian's voice was rough with pain.

"Flint—you've been hit," Steve said.

"My right arm—just above the elbow. You can't do anything about it now!" Killian growled. "Go after that bunch, Steve!"

Gant called the others. He told Merle Schantz and Erling Smith to unload the horses. "Honey and Turk and I will try to pen that bunch up; you boys come along as soon as you can. Flint—you get one of the train crew to tie up that arm. You take charge here. Don't let anyone walk back up the track to La Paz to send any wires; the dispatcher in Silver City knows the special is setting on the siding; he'll keep it in the clear until he hears from me."

The gulch, shallow where it came up against the railroad right-of-way, deepened quickly. It was narrow and choked with brush. It was the marshal's idea to keep up on the rim and follow the gulch until it pinched out. They had moved half a mile away from the tracks when Steve told them to pull up. They listened carefully but caught no sounds from below.

"Movin' mighty careful, ain't they?" Turk Beamer growled. "They can't be thinkin' of fortin' up down there; we could cut them to pieces when daylight comes!"

"They're still ahead of us," Steve declared. "The boys will be here with the horses directly; we can really get moving then."

Starr had detected their presence on the rim, however. With the cunning that had brought him out of more than one tight squeeze, he had turned back. He had a badly wounded man with him. With characteristic ruthlessness, he left the man to fend for himself and climbed out of the gulch with four of his gang just as Erling and Merle Schantz came along with the horses. Instantly, Starr tried to take advantage of this unexpected break.

"Erling and Merel have run into trouble!" Honey cried, as the flat crack of rifles reached them from the direction of the tracks. "Those birds are not down in the gulch, Steve! They've turned back!"

What had happened was as obvious to Gant as it was to Honey. A word sent them running back, the gun flashes telling them where Schantz and Smith were making their stand.

When Starr and his followers found themselves caught in the middle and the way back into the gulch barred, they fled across open country for a quarter of a mile and reached a stone sheep corral on one of Mart Ducker's ranches. Temporarily, they were safe there, but with the corral surrounded, escape was cut off.

After an hour, only an occasional shot came from the corral.

"Saving their cartridges," Honey muttered. "They know they got to bust out of there before daylight, or the jig is up."

Steve nodded. "It would be foolish to try to rush them. The five or six who got away must be almost back to the Cathedral Peaks by now. If Jackson was in that bunch we can kiss him good-bye." He wasn't forgetting what Jeff had said about being in the Peaks with some of his friends. But there was too much country out there to count on any such move proving successful.

JUST before dawn, a flurry of shots came from the corral. Steve interpreted it as the prelude for a dash for freedom. He mounted

his posse and they closed in. Halfway between the barn and the corral, they cut off three men, who threw down their guns and surrendered. Two others reached the ranch yard and took refuge behind a wagon box that lay on the ground.

It was growing lighter by the second. In the gray dawn, the two men started to crawl toward the barn. A burst of gunfire from the posse stopped one and he wriggled back to the wagon box and tried to stand off the marshals.

"It's Frank Starr!" Steve growled. "Don't take a chance on him till he throws his guns away!" He raised his voice and called to the bandit. "Give yourself up, Starr, or we'll have to kill you!"

"All right, I've had enough of this!" was the flinty answer. Starr stood up, but he failed to toss his guns away. Turk Beamer broke toward him. The bandit had a shot left and he snapped it at Turk. It ricochetted off the latter's saddle horn and did no damage. Honey wheeled in close and struck Starr down with a clubbed gun. "That'll stop you, you treacherous snake!"

The man who had reached the barn had found a horse. Gant was riding toward the door when the fleeing blackleg came charging out. With a savage snarl of satisfaction Steve saw that it was Yampa.

Recognition was mutual. Yampa was not the least surprised to see Steve Gant; the way things had gone that night had convinced him that it was federal marshals he and Starr were facing. With a consuming hatred, that managed to be almost impersonal, for he had no reason to suspect why Steve really wanted him, he shoved his six-gun around under his bronc's neck and blasted a shot at the marshal.

Gant felt the wicked breath of the slug as it fanned past his cheek. Dropping the rein, he whipped his rifle to his shoulder and sent a bullet crashing into the brain of Jackson's mount. The animal pitched to its knees and flung its rider through the air. Yampa lost his gun and lay on the ground stunned from his fall. Steve turned him over with his foot.

"Get up!" he ordered, and when Yampa was slow to obey, he yanked him to his feet and marched him back to the wagon box, where Honey and the others waited with Starr and the rest of the prisoners. Honey grinned from ear to ear on seeing who it was Steve had in tow. "You fetched him. Steve! Things are sure looking up!"

Gant was not ready to give Yampa any enlightenment even now as to his personal interest in him; the man had been caught robbing a train, and there was a warrant out on him for the killing of Indian Joe Gains, a fact with which he was undoubtedly acquainted. For the present, that was enough. Before Honey could accidentally let something slip, Steve ordered the prisoners marched back to the siding.

The sun was well above the horizon when they reached the railroad. Killian, his wounded arm bound up, met them. He had the conductor with him. Steve called the two men aside.

"Flint, I'm going to leave Jackson and the rest of them with you. I know it seems hopeless, but the five of us are going after the bunch that pulled away from here last night. The conductor can go back to La Paz now and wire the chief dispatcher in Silver City; he'll be expecting word and he'll have the northbound local stop to pick you up. Stick close to Jackson and Starr till you see them locked up. . . What's the account here?"

"Three dead men," Killian answered. "There was two we dropped when they hit out for the slope. About an hour ago Crisp Miller staggered in. He'd been over in the gulch. He died a few minutes ago. There's hell to pay with some of those Mexicans, though. They say they had about two thousand dollars lifted from 'em."

"Honey's got the sack. Starr had it with him. But we're going to need the money for evidence, Flint. How many claim they were robbed?"

"Ten, I think."

"Well, you talk to them. Tell them

if they'll go back to town with you that the judge will release the money in a day or two. It would be a hardship on them for the court to do otherwise, even if this gang doesn't plead guilty."

Pausing only long enough to replenish their supply of cartridges, Honey and he and the three special deputies sent their horses up the slope and struck west.

THE sun swung across the sky and the shadows were getting long before they began to close in on the Peaks. There was only one good trail in from the east; a rider who was in a hurry, or looking to his comfort, would use it. Steve was reasonably certain this was the way Starr had led his gang to the siding at La Paz and that the men who had fled from the scene of the robbery had taken it. Believing he didn't have better than one chance in a hundred of overhauling them, it was his intention to proceed only as far as the mountain meadows at the base of the peaks, known locally as Hardscrabble Flats; if he didn't make contact with the bandits by then, he'd turn back.

They had proceeded another mile, when Honey rose up in his stirrups and signalled for the others to pull up. "I thought I'd heard shooting," he explained. "Listen. . . There it is again!"

"No question about it," Steve agreed. "It's moving this way. Suppose we pull off the trail. We may be getting some help."

The irregular pattern of the shots told him there was a running fight going on. It came nearer and nearer. The drumming of hoofs reached them. It swept out of his mind any doubt of what it meant. Before another ten minutes had passed, six hard-pressed riders came flashing down the uncertain trail. When they were a hundred yards away, he and his deputies wheeled out and cut them off with a well-placed warning volley. The trapped renegades were thrown into a panic. They had had a bitter taste of what was behind them, and to be attacked from yet another direction was too much for them. After a flurry of wild shots, they began to hold up their hands in surrender.

"A fine bunch of riffraff!" Honey declared contemptuously, as he looked them over after they had been lined up. "Tinhorn badmen and two-bit rustlers! No wonder they ran!" Steve was giving orders for the return to La Paz. Honey put a question to him that was for his ears alone. "Who was it chased this bunch back into our hands, Steve?"

Gant was careful about his answer. "I could lie to you, Honey, and tell you I didn't know. In this game a man sometimes finds friends in strange places. Suppose we let it go at that."

CHAPTER XVIII

Gallows Bait

STEVE GANT sat at his desk two days later, rereading a telegram from Randy, announcing that he had won, and the other Association backed candidates along with him—Ducker had spent money like water in a vain attempt to stem the tide, but the victory had amounted to a virtual landslide—when the door opened, and Mart Ducker stamped in with all his usual bluster.

"Looks like you clipped me pretty hard up at the Mesa; but the way you handled that business at La Paz kinda evens things up, Gant," he remarked, taking a chair on his own invitation. "I'd have had some trouble getting herders next spring if those lads had lost their money." He lit a cigar with an insolent flourish. "Needless to say, you weren't aiming to do me a favor."

"As long as you understand that, why waste breath on it?" Steve returned, giving him a cold scrutiny. "You didn't drop in here to chew that over. What's on your mind?"

"That kid brother of yours. He's got himself elected, but that doesn't mean I'm going to let him walk over me. He's made a lot of promises about getting a road opened into the Red Bluffs. That's just campaign hogwash, Gant. The Kid got what

he wanted, and he better be smart enough to play ball with me."

The marshal laughed jarringly. "It's a little late for talk of that sort. With Thad Taylor taking a seat on the county board, the votes are there to do something about the road. The crooked deal you and Necker put over will either be set aside, or the road will be opened. When you came in, I figured you'd have something to say about your old hired hand, Yampa Jackson."

Mart removed the cigar from his mouth. Turning it over between thumb and forefinger, he examined it nonchalantly. "When you employ as many men as I do, Gant, you can't hand-pick them all. Some don't turn out so good."

"Meaning they sometimes fall down on the job?" Steve retorted sarcastically. "Jackson must have been a great disappointment to you. Fortunately, he's due to get his neck stretched, and that'll relieve you some."

Ducker's blue eyes took on an icy glitter. He knew he wasn't doing so well. The real purpose of his visit was to discover, if possible, if Steve had any intention of trying to pin the killing of his father on Jackson. Yampa's arrest had presented him with a dilemma, and he was undecided whether to ignore the man's plight, and run the risk of gaining his further enmity, or to provide him with a lawyer and aid his cause in the hope of keeping him from talking. Personally, he was anxious to have Yampa hustled off to Canon City and hanged by the neck until he was dead. But there was the matter of his own neck to be considered, and though his danger seemed remote, he was not ignoring it.

"The damn fool is in trouble enough without me raking up old scores against him," he declared virtuously. "They say he killed Joe Gains, don't they?"

"That's the story," Gant replied carelessly. "I've been expecting your man, Evers, to claim him on that charge. Maybe you haven't given the word yet."

Mart laughed off the dig. "I don't string along with has-beens, Gant. Evers is of no further use to me. He's on his own, as far as I'm concerned. Seems to me a halfwit could get a conviction against Jackson. Fenn and Danner, who got blasted by him, are around to testify. So is Richards and the other young fellow up at the ranger camp."

HE WAS fishing now, and Steve obligingly fed him the answer he wanted. "It will be a short trial. Dumb as he is, Evers won't be able to bungle it."

Mart tried to hide his satisfaction but it was apparent enough to the marshal. "That's neither here nor there as far as I'm concerned," he declared. "I'm a lot more interested in what that kid brother of yours does. Don't let him get the bit in his teeth just because he won an election. I'm willing to meet him halfway any time, but I don't propose to take any pushing around."

"Suppose you tell him that yourself the next time you're in the Mesa," Steve suggested guilelessly. "He'll be glad to listen to anything you have to say."

Ducker lingered only long enough to convince himself that he had covered up his real purpose sufficiently. Steve sat there with a rocky face after his visitor left. "You've got a surprise coming to you, mister!" he muttered. "There'll be a real pay-off this time!"

He was busy for the next few days with the hearing given Frank Starr and the rest of his gang. They were promptly indicted and bound over to stand trial. Information had reached the marshal's office that the expedition to Brown's Park was returning empty-handed. The following Friday Smoky Guthrie came storming in, cross as a bear. His face was a little thin.

"Well, looks like you rode some of the suet off you," Steve exclaimed jestingly.

"By jasper, I won't make such a fool of myself again even for you!" Smoky snorted. "The next time the railroad companies think up something like this, they ought to be com-

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mitted to an institution! You had some luck though; things sure went your way."

They worked out all right," Steve admitted. "Are you in town for Jackson?"

"Yeh, I got the papers. Have you tried to git anythin' out of him? About your old man, I mean?"

Gant shook his head. "Time enough for that when he's been bound over on the Gains killing. I'll go back to the Mesa with you this afternoon. When you get Jackson locked up, keep an eye on him; an attempt might be made to rub him out. Ducker was in the other day, trying to find out what was on my mind. I gave him a line of talk that he swallowed. I don't want him to get spooky until we're ready to grab him."

"Naturally!" Guthrie grumbled. "I'm goin' over to the courthouse now. By the way, have you seen Burke?"

"Yeh, he looked me up as soon as he hit town. I gave him a boost and he's making the most of it. Will you be back here to go to dinner with me?"

Smoky nodded. "You be sure to wait. I got a little surprise for you."

The surprise proved to be the news that Rita and Randy were engaged. Though Steve had prepared himself for such an announcement, it gave him a twinge.

"I saw it comin' a long way back," said Smoky. "I reckon you did, too. I couldn't have wished anythin' better for my end of it."

"Nor I," Steve declared stoutly. "The kid's getting a wonderful girl. I guess he realizes it."

HE FOUND Randy changed; more mature, surer of himself. The energy and boyish eagerness that had always distinguished him were still in evidence, but they were cloaked in a new sense of responsibility. Steve talked with him for an hour and for the first time felt free to disclose his meeting with Jeff and certain facts he had learned from Nap Dumont.

"Before we do anything, suppose we ask Mr. Nesmith's advice," Ran-

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dy suggested. "We can see him this evening. I believe we're perfectly safe in asking Jeff to come in, but I'd like to have Mr. Nesmith's opinion. You don't mind taking him into your confidence, Steve."

"No, I trust the man as much as you do. We'll see him after dinner. We better be getting along; I told Smoky we'd pick him up on our way to the house."

Steve had never seen Rita so radiant. "I know the two of you will be happy," he told her, when they were alone. "I'm not going to welcome you into the family; you've been one of us too long for that. If Randy will just listen to you, you'll send him to the United States Senate before you're through."

His tone was light and bantering, but there was sometning stamped on his mouth that betrayed his secret. With her eyes suddenly misting, Rita drew down his head and kissed him.

"I've hurt you, Steve," she whispered. "And I couldn't help it. I love him so—"

"It's all right, Rita. I know this is the way it should be."

Smoky came into the room and the moment was over. But in some intangible way Steve knew a peace of mind he had never hoped would be his. Later, when he and Randy sat down with Nesmith, the restlessness that had been gnawing at him for weeks was gone.

"If Jeff understands that he will be held without bail until he has his hearing, I see no reason why you shouldn't ask him to come in at this time," the old lawyer declared, when he heard their stories. "Evers can't rush him to trial even if he got an indictment by some trick. Jackson will be arraigned in a day or two and bound over. That will put his trial on the calendar, and it wouldn't be possible for Evers to reach your brother's case. I've said right along that the Grand Jury won't indict Jeff on Buck Hanna's story. The facts you've given me tonight bear that out."

"How have Ogilvie and Evers reacted to their defeat?" Steve asked.

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"Ogilvie is a crushed, beaten man. He realizes he can never ask anything from the electorate again; that he killed himself politically when he sold out to Mart Ducker. Ducker has dumped him, of course. Evers is in the same boat, but he seems to have the idea that the League will do something for him in some direction. We can expect him to block us if he can."

"He knows he can't go too far," Randy asserted. "As district attorney-elect I haven't any authority, but I've got the weight of public opinion behind me, and I don't intend to pull any punches with Evers. Thad is taking his seat on the board at the next meeting of the commissioners. That gives us a majority. I reminded Evers of it this morning and told him to his face that I'd have him removed from office at once if he refused to cooperate with me. You get word to Dumont, Steve; I'll take care of Jesse Evers."

"I'll go to the Crossing in the morning," the marshal agreed.

IT was a week later to the day that Rita stepped on the porch before breakfast to find Jeff Gant sitting there. Her excited cry brought her father and Steve to the door.

"Git in here, Jeff!" Guthrie ordered. "We'll send for Randy and have breakfast together before the town starts buzzin'." He grabbed Jeff's hand and pumped it warmly. "This ain't the happiest home-comin' you could have, but things are workin' out."

Broken Mesa had already been rocked by the startling developments of the past week. Evers had acted swiftly in the matter of Yampa Jackson's arraignment. Gus Danner and Whitey Fenn, not yet fully recovered from their wounds, had been brought down from Salt Springs; Dick Richards and his assistant had come in from the Reserve. On their evidence, Jackson had been quickly

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indicted. When the town learned that Jeff had given himself up and that both he and Yampa were now lodged in the county jail, tongues really began to wag.

Doc Ranscamp was in the prosecutor's office when the sheriff walked in with Steve and Randy. Evers dropped back in his chair, his face pasty with surprise and chagrin when Guthrie told him Jeff had surrendered. This was the first Doc had heard about it, too. "That's fine!" he declared. "It'll give Jesse a chance to right a bad mistake." He glanced unpityingly at Evers. "What are you gasping about? You able to read the hand-writing on the wall, at last?"

The prosecutor squirmed. "I'm not going to be bulldozed into taking any hasty action!" he snapped. "I'm taking Jackson to trial in ten days; I need every minute of that time to get ready. Jeff Gant can remain in jail until I can get around to bringing him before the Grand Jury."

"Don't try any trick like that," Randy warned. "If you make any attempt to stall, Evers, I'll have Jeff released on a habeas corpus and charge you with a misdemeanor and neglect of your duty. This county would enjoy seeing you fined and put behind the bars."

Steve said little, being content to let Randy carry the fight. Evers promised nothing, but that afternoon he asked for extradition papers on Buck Hanna and Frank Zuber, still serving time in the Wyoming penitentiary. Randy at once announced to the court that he would represent his brother at the hearing and as Jeff's attorney received Ogilvie's permission to consult with his client.

WITH things coming to a head, Steve had no thought of leaving the Mesa. Though he spent most of his time in the sheriff's office, he made no attempt to question Jackson. From what Smoky and Chuck had to tell him, he knew Yampa was beginning to go to pieces. The court had appointed an attorney to defend him, but he didn't take any encouragement from that. Though Ducker

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(Continued From Page 91)

had not appeared in town, Steve felt certain he would come. Three days later Mart arrived and went out to his ranch at once. He was back in the Mesa that evening and made his headquarters at the Star.

"It ain't business that's keepin' him here," Smoky observed to Steve. "For all his money and drag, he's worried."

"He's got good reason to be. When Randy comes in tomorrow to see Jeff, I'm going to make my play with Jackson while the rest of you are out in front. I'll bring Nap into town just to have him here if things go my way."

It was eleven o'clock the next morning when he pulled a stool up to the door of Yampa's cell. The latter glared at him with dull, sleepless eyes. "Can't you guys leave me alone?" he snarled.

"That's what Ducker is doing—leaving you alone. He's been in town a couple days. He ought to be in here with you."

The marshal saw the man stiffen. "The double crossin' rat!" Jackson ripped out. "A lot of thanks I got for doin' his dirty work!"

"Yampa—do you believe my brother killed Spangler the way they say?"

"Course I don't! Spangler talked the whole thing over with Slack and me. We was going to go through with it after burnin' the house. The game was to git your brother across the line and when he was busy with Ike and me, Spangler was goin' to sneak a shot at him. But what's that got to do with me?"

"Plenty! Listen to this." Steve read him Ike Slack's dying statement, and before Jackson could recover from his surprise, confronted him with Nap Dumont's evidence. "Now you know why I wanted you; you killed my old man. It wasn't on Spangler's orders; Mart Ducker had given the word. The State can only hang you once. I don't know how much satisfaction it'll be to you to have Ducker get the same dose you're going to get, but that's what he has coming to him. You can make it easy if you'll talk."

Steve got up and started to walk away.

"Wait a minute, Gant!" Yampa called to him. "Git a stenographer in here; I'll make a statement!"

ARMED with Jackson's confession and with Dumont ready to repeat his story, the marshal was ready to ask for a warrant on Ducker.

"Ogilvie will have to give it. But we'll nab our man before we step into the courthouse," he told Smoky and Randy. "This is one time when I'm dead willing to exceed my authority."

"That part of it won't bother me," Smoky rasped. "You sit right here, Randy; Steve and me will attend to this."

It was noon when they stepped into the hotel. Ducker was not in the dining room. They decided to wait at the door for him. He came along ten minutes later. Thrasher, Spangler's successor was with him. Mart eyed them suspiciously as they stepped up. Guthrie shouldered Thrasher aside.

"What is this?" Mart demanded, his face ablaze with anger.

"It's an arrest," Smoky told him.

"For what?"

"For complicity in the killin' of Carson Gant! Git yourself turned around; we're walkin' you over to the jail!"

Ducker knocked him down in a burst of rage. It unleashed every trace of restraint in Steve. His fist crashed into Ducker's jaw. He caught him a second time and drove him to his knees. It wasn't a fight; it was too one-sided for that, for, big as he was, Mart Ducker was too soft with easy living to stand up to him.

Thrasher had tried to take a hand, only to have Smoky put a gun on him. With his clothes dishevelled and blood streaking his face, Ducker was led out.

The arrest had thrown the hotel into frenzied excitement. The effect on the town was hardly less dramatic. When Steve, the sheriff and Randy and Dumont faced Ogilvie and Evers after dinner, it was evident at once that they were staggered by this latest development. Yampa's confession

(Continued On Page 94)

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(Continued From Page 93)

and Nap's statement reduced them to grovelling servility. With shaking hand Ogilvie signed the warrant on Ducker. It was still incredible to him: the great Martin Ducker, president of the powerful Drovers' League, jailed for murder. For the first time, he fully realized the extent of his folly in ever having pinned his hopes to Ducker's star. He glared malevolently at Evers.

"You won't have to appear before the Grand Jury on the Jeff Gant warrant. I'm vacating it right now. I'll send my clerk down with an order for you to release him, Guthrie."

"I reckon that's all you can do!" Smoky declared fiercely. "If I was the two of you, I'd begin to lookin' up some new scenery. It ain't goin' to be healthy for either one of you around here much longer. Come on, Steve! Let's git outa here!"

RANDY and Rita were married just after the first of the year. White winter had come to Broken Mesa. Steve, Jeff and Smoky stood on the station platform waving farewell to the honeymooners.

"We'll be takin' a trip ourselves, Steve," Guthrie muttered, trying to hide his emotion. "The law will require our presence in the prison yard at Canon City in a few weeks. It ain't nothin' to look forward to."

"I suppose not," the marshal answered. "But Ducker and Jackson richly deserve their fate. This country will be a better place to live without them."

"It won't give me back the Mule Shoe," said Jeff.

"No, but there'll be some fine new range open this spring when the Government breaks up the Ute Reservation. That'll be our chance. Between us, we'll buy a sizable piece of it. We still own the Mule Shoe brand, and we'll keep it going. I know that will please the old man."

"It sure will," Smoky agreed. "Carse never had much but that brand and you boys, but they was powerful important to him."

THE END

BOOT-HILL TRAP

By Lee Foren

Sometimes a man's no better than he's painted!

OLD Jake Weeks was re-painting the sign on the big window of the Horse Shoe Cafe. A fast-talking salesman who had traveled through Harloburg the week before had talked him into buying a new-fangled type of paint, a paint that would dry in four hours. He was testing its drying abilities now. He knew the paint was not meant to go on glass—it was a wood paint—but he was experimenting anyway. The Greek who owned the Horse Shoe would never notice if the paint did run a little; he was always too drunk to see straight.

Old Jake was putting the finishing touches on the first O when big Mike Hensley rode into town, his bronc covered with lather. The man curbed his bronc to a sliding halt in front of Sheriff Bradfield's office, ground-tied his horse and stalked inside. The door to the sheriff's office was open and Old Jake heard the cattleman's words.

"Sher'ff, I jus' come in from Snake crick. Ol' Hans Martin is dead! The door was locked an' I glanced through the window. He's slumped over his desk. Looks like he's shot hisself through the head!"

Fingers trembling, Jake Weeks put his brush into the paint can. A gaunt, stoop-shouldered oldster, he hobbled across the dusty street, his legs so bowed a coyote could lope between them. Hans Martin was his friend. Years before they had run a cow-outfit together down in Arizona; but

(Continued On Page 96)

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(Continued From Page 95)

punching cows had been too tame for Jake; he had turned to lawing for a living.

Time had dulled his gunspeed, so he had drifted north to Wyoming to be close to Hans in the few remaining days of his life. Now, a dull ache tugging his heart, he realized Hans was dead.

He was frowning when he entered the sheriff's office. Just that morning he had been out to Hans Martin's outfit where he had done some painting. While Hans had been out in the barn Jake had slyly painted the inside of one drawer on Hans' desk with the new-fangled paint. He had waited around thinking perhaps he could trick Hans into putting his hand into the drawer and get it smeared, but Hans hadn't had occasion to open the drawer so Jake had ridden away disgruntled, wishing he could have made his trick work.

As Jake entered, big Mike Hensley was telling his story. When he came to the part where he had looked through the window Sheriff Bradfield spoke. "You didn't go inside, huh?"

"No."

"Then mabbe ol' Hans ain't dead." Bradfield spoke to a deputy. "Cain't tell whether a man is dead or not by jus' lookin' through a window, Jenkins. Go get Doc Smart an' we'll head out that direction." The sheriff spoke to Jake Weeks. "Wasn't you out to Hans Martin's this mornin'?"

"Did some paintin' for him," said Jake.

The sheriff's eyes narrowed in thought. "How'd he act an' talk then?"

"He was kiddin' an' jokin'."

Hensley spoke. "What time did you leave there?"

Eyes shifted to Jake. The roughness of Hensley's overbearing tone brought a touch of anger to the old-

(Cotninued On Page 98)

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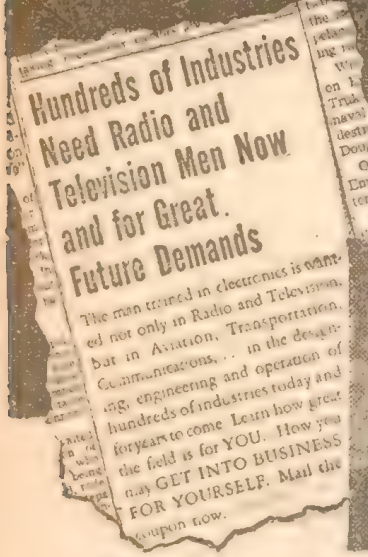
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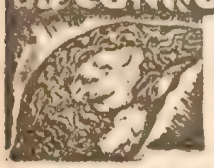

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(Continued From Page 96)

ster. Unknown to the sheriff, Hensley and Hans Martin had quarreled a number of times. Hensley had plenty of land but not much water and Martin had good waterholes. Hensley had offered to buy Martin out but Martin would not sell. Harsh words had followed and they had almost gone for their guns at one time.

Jake said levelly, "About two hours ago, I reckon."

Hensley spoke to the sheriff. "That musta been about the time I dropped in on Martin. Musta took me almost an hour an' a half to come into town. Martin musta got killed about the time this old rooster left. You don't suppose—"

"Button up that loose talk!" snapped Bradfield. "Ol' Jake an' Martin were good friends." He added, "An' how do you know somebody killed Hans Martin? Maybe he killed himself. You say the door was locked."

"That's right," said Hensley. "Maybe he did commit suicide."

Sheriff Bradfield spoke to Jake. "Better come with us, Jake." It was not a request. It was an order.

Jake bit back his anger. The group filed out the door. Jake still carried his paint can. As Hensley stalked past Jake the cattleman unknowingly brushed too close and the lip of the can touched the handle of his holstered gun. The gray paint made a dull smudge there.

THE ride to Hans Martin's place was made in silence. They rode fast, a hard compact group of riders. Sheriff Bradfield, big and staunch, led the way. His deputy rode on one side; Hensley on the other. The medico and old Jake rode together slightly behind the three.

Jake Weeks' ancient forehead packed more wrinkles than usual. There was something fishy here—decidedly fishy. He knew Hans Martin had not killed himself. Hans would never commit suicide. He was tough and hard and would never take the easy way out. He would fight to the bitter end.

Besides that, Hans Martin had no reason to take his life. He had no

debts, owned a good outfit, and had no worries. No, decided Jake, if Hans was dead, then somebody had killed him. But who?

Jake searched his brain. Only one man, he knew, had it in for Martin; that man was Hensley. Jake tried to ponder it through. Martin had no heirs. If he was dead the territory of Wyoming would inherit the lands; they would be placed on public sale. And who would buy the outfit then? Who would have money enough to buy it?

Jake shifted in his saddle. Only one man in this region had money enough to buy Martin's outfit, and that man was Hensley. Jake let his mind dwell on that for a while, then dismissed it as they rode into the Martin outfit.

They drew rein in front of the log house and dismounted. Martin's cowhands were out on spring round-up, working the Clear Water country and Martin had been the only one home when Jake had been out to the spread that morning. Sheriff Bradfield went up to the door and pounded on it but got no answer. He tried the knob; the door was locked.

"No use wastin' your strength, sher'ff," said Hensley. "Look in the window."

They went to the window. The lawman planted his big forearms on the sill and pressed his beefy face against the glass. Jake noticed he had not taken the precaution to glance at the sill to see if the dust had been disturbed. But Jake, due to his long career as a lawman, had done just that. And noticed that the sill had no dust on it.

"He's slumped over his desk," said Bradfield. "We gotta bust down that door, men."

"Try the window," said Jake.

Bradfield placed his heavy hands on the frame and shoved up. The window opened squeakily. The deputy, who was a small man, crawled inside and opened the door. They entered and stood around Hans Martin.

The sight made Jake's blood stir angrily. The bullet had smashed in back of Hans Martin's right ear. The

(Continued On Page 100)

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(Continued From Page 99)

cattleman was slumped over his desk, a big .45 in his right hand. Bradfield picked the gun from the limp fingers while the doctor felt for a trace of pulse. The medico held the heavy wrist for a long moment and then let it fall back to the desk.

"I rode out here for nothing," he said.

Hensley said, "Too bad. Danged nice ol' gent, too. Best neighbor a man could have. What do you think happened, Sher'ff?"

Bradfield smelled the barrel of the .45. "Been fired recently," he said. He opened the loading gate and kicked out the shells. Five unfired cartridges and the case of a fired bullet fell into his big palm. He sniffed the fired case. "Just recently," he said.

SILENCE fell. The sheriff juggled the fired bullet, his eyes thoughtful. Old Jake moved slightly to one side and glanced at the window. The inside sill was clean, too. Then suddenly Old Jake's blood pounded excitedly.

There, on the window sill, was a smudge of light grey paint! And, according to old Jake's reckoning, that paint shouldn't have been there. It should have been on the drawer in old Hans Martin's desk! Jake Weeks held his tongue and glanced at Mike Hensley's hands; no paint there.

The whole setup was clear now. Somebody had murdered old Martin and gone through his desk. He had got his hands smeared with the fresh paint. Then he had gone out the window after sticking an empty cartridge in Martin's gun to make it look like suicide.

"He's killed himself," repeated the sheriff.

Jake Weeks spoke. "I don't think so, sheriff."

Bradfield stared at him. So did Hensley and the deputy and the doctor. When Bradfield spoke his voice held a touch of cynicism. "You tellin' us you killed him?" His eyes narrowed slightly. "Maybe I oughta hold you at that, Jake. Maybe you did kill him."

Jake's voice was angry. "Shut up,

you fat tin-star." Jake bit his words. "If I'd a killed him I'd done a better job than this. An' besides, he was my friend—my only friend. Men have stopped lead for sayin' less than you just said, Bradfield."

Bradfield smiled then. He was quick to anger; quick to smile. "I'll sure take them words back, Jake," he drawled. "You're an ol'-time lawdog. What'd you say?"

"He's been murdered," declared Jake. "Hans Martin was hard of hearin'. The gent who killed him came from behind, through the open door. Hans never heard him. Then the killer made it look like suicide by plantin' a fired shell in Hans' gun. He made his way out through the window, pullin' it shut behin' him. But first he searched the drawers in Hans' desk. Why, I don't know. Prob'ly lookin' for some cash he thought Hans had hid there."

Bradfield was frowning. The deputy's mouth hung open. The doctor was plainly awed. Only Hensley was untouched by emotion. His voice boomed across space. "Prove what you jus' said, Jake."

Jake turned to the window. "See that smudge of paint there? The killer left that. An' I'll tell you where he got it. He got it out of the top left-hand drawer on Martin's desk. I painted it there this mornin'."

Hensley scowled. "But that don't tell us who did it."

You're wrong there," corrected Jake Weeks. "It does tell us." His eyes never left Hensley's. "You did it, Mike Hensley."

Hensley's face was angry. "You're talkin' through your hat. By hades, if you wasn't an ol' man I'd—!"

Jake's hand was on his gun. He clipped his words. "Hensley got some of that paint on his hands, sher'ff. He washed it off with kerosene. That an' turpentine is jus' about the only two things that'll take it off. But he made one error. He didn't wash his hands in water afterwards. You get close enough an' you can still smell the coal oil on 'em!"

Bradfield moved toward Hensley. "You get away," said Hensley. Bradfield stopped. He opened the top

(Continued On Page 102)

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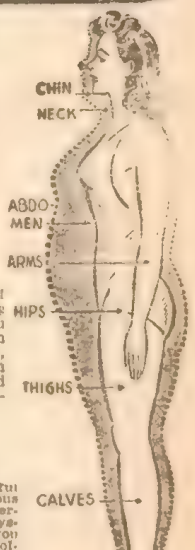

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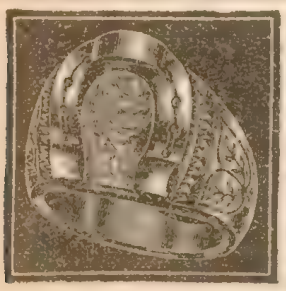

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(Continued From Page 101)

left-hand drawer. "By heaven, ol' Jake's right. See, somebody has disturbed the paint." He touched it. "But the paint is hard now. It sure sets fast."

"Look at his pants," said Jake. "His right pant's leg."

BRADFIELD whirled and stared. He said huskily, "He's right again. There's paint on your pant's leg, Hensley."

"Was paintin' my barn this mornin'."

"Not with a paint that color," corrected Jake. "I got the only can of that color an' type of paint in the country."

"Can you prove that?"

"I sure can. When we was down in town you rubbed your gun against my paint can an' got some on your gun-butt. Compare that with the color of paint on the drawer—"

Mike Hensley's gun was rising fast. The unexpected draw caught Jake Weeks off-guard slightly. He knew, with sinking heart, that Hensley had him bested.

From the corner of his eye he saw that Bradfield and his deputy were also drawing; the medico had flattened himself on the floor and was screaming. Then the roar of Hensley's gun drowned out the doctor's cries of fear.

Jake Weeks felt his shirt jerk suddenly and he knew that Hensley had shot wide from nervous desperation. He had one second to place a shot before Hensley could fire again. Jake shot twice in rapid succession, and Hensley hit the floor.

Bradfield's jaw was hanging wide and the deputy's eyes held admiration for old Jake's gun-speed. The doc crawled across the floor and felt Hensley's pulse.

"Another dead man," he said.

Bradfield found his voice. "Tricked," he mumbled. "Tricked by a smudge of paint." He felt again of the paint on the desk drawer. "That sure dries fast, Jake."

"For once," said Jake, "the salesman didn't lie."

THE END

TRAIL AND SADDLE

WILLIAM COMSTOCK—INJUN FIGHTER

By Kenneth P. Wood

Almost important adjunct to the United States army during the Indian campaigns were the military scouts. Rugged, hard-riding and hard-shooting plainsmen, long accustomed to dealing with the warlike redskin at his worst, the safety of a whole regiment often depended upon the efficiency of the one man who acted in this capacity. But rarely did the scout effect the uniform of a soldier, preferring to be distinguished by his colorful fringed buckskin jacket, wide-brimmed hat, and high leather boots, in which he made a striking picture as he sat astride his mustang with a long rifle across the pommel of his ornate saddle.

Famous among the scouts under General George A. Custer was William Comstock, the sharpshooter who narrowly missed the title of "Buffalo Bill," when competing with William Cody for the belt of champion bison hunter. Wary and experienced as a frontiersman, Comstock was invaluable as a scout and guide.

"Injun fightin' and Injun huntin' is a trade of itself. If I know anything, it's Injuns," he used to say, when expressing an opinion in any case. Officers and men listened with deference to what they knew were words of sound advice, and no one ever thought of doubting the assertion quoted.

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(Continued On Page 104)

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(Continued From Page 103)

outfit had reached Beaver Creek, fifty miles away. But at this point a full squadron, well armed and mounted, was marching from the fort to form a junction with the freighters. The course of the supply train lay over the open Kansas prairie, where the deep ravines leading to water afforded excellent shelter for hostile Indians. Yet so level was the surrounding country, so almost imperceptible was the formation of the ravines, that an unpracticed eye would have seen no place of concealment.

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And surely enough as they neared the depression referred to, the keen eyes of Comstock saw strange figures peering over the brow far away to the right. His field-glass revealed that they were Indians and his judgment was soon confirmed by the officers. In a little while the lurking savages saw that they had been discovered and rode boldly to the crest of the hill. Twenty-thirty, a hundred Cheyenne wariors came into view, and still from beyond the summit new hosts appeared. Between six and seven hundred braves arrayed in full war dress, brilliantly hideous with paint and feathers, armed with rifles, slowly bore down upon the military caravan.

The little detachment of soldiers resolved to sell their lives as dearly as possible. The train was formed into two parallel columns, the infantry in the center, and the mounted troopers forming an outer guard along the vehicles, then the march was resumed. As they moved forward in momentary expectation of a rush from the Cheyennes, the Indians continued to approach warily un-

(Continued On Page 106)

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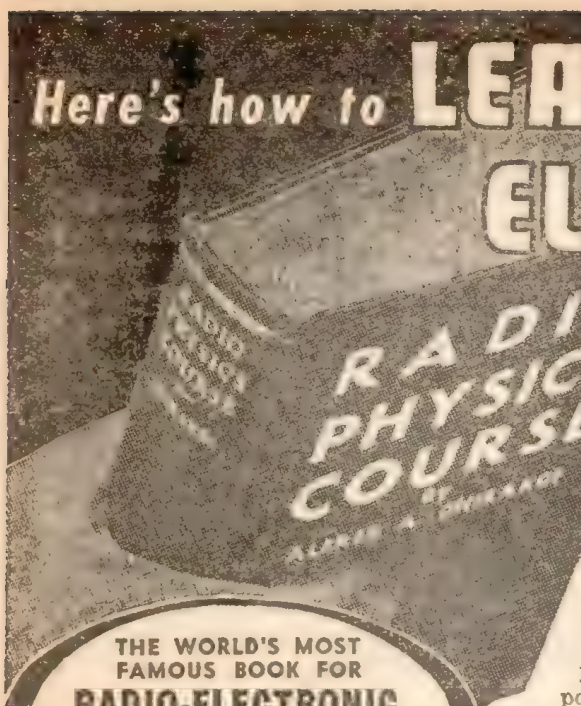

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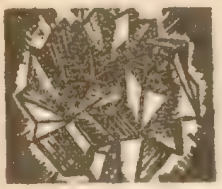

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(Continued From Page 104)

til they came within easy range, but the soldiers had received orders not to fire unless attacked. Then suddenly, with a blood-curdling war-whoop the hostiles charged—to stampede the horses, to massacre the escort, to carry off the supplies in the wagons—such was evidently their plan.

STRAIGHT toward the caravan they galloped at full speed, as if to trample beneath the feet of their ponies the handful of guards along the line of wagons. Immediately the cavalrymen dismounted, dropped to their knees as the attackers came thundering upon them, and taking deliberate aim at the moving horde, poured a deadly volley of lead into the crowded ranks. The noisy savages wheeled off to the right at this unexpected reception, pausing only momentarily to gain possession of their dead and wounded, while the troopers cheered loudly. Comstock comenced to taunt the warriors in their own tongue for their lack of success. But his words to the soldiers gave a less hopeful view of the situation. Seeing that the redskins had withdrawn from rifle range where they were very likely holding a powwow, Bill Comstock remarked:

"There's no use even hopin' that they'll give up so easily. Not by a damn sight! Six hundred red devils ain't goin' to let fifty pale faces keep 'em from enjoyin' the sugar and bacon that's in the wagons. They're also itching for our scalps, to make up for the braves we knocked over a few minutes ago."

While Major Elliot passed along the line cautioning the men not to waste ammunition, as all of it on hand would probably be needed, the hostiles returned to the attack, but in a different formation. They had hoped at first that their superiority in numbers would enable them to sweep over and crush the hated whites, but this open style of attack, so foreign to the redman's nature, had proved unsuccessful, and they determined to act with greater discretion.

Led by their chiefs, the whole war-party rode in single file, at a safe distance from the carbines of the

(Continued On Page 108)

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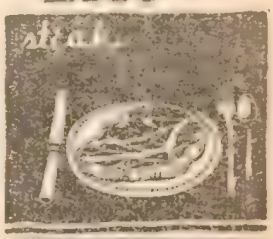

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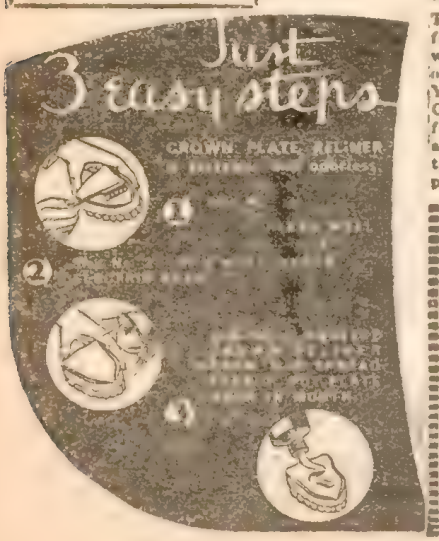

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(Continued From Page 106)

troops. Gradually the long line turned, curving around the smaller line of soldiers, until the whites were completely surrounded. Around and around they rode, as the vulture circles about the dying prey, each attacker hanging upon the opposite side of his well-trained mount leaving only his head and one foot exposed, and thus protected by a living, moving barricade, aimed his weapons either over or under the neck of the cayuse.

Still the gallant little force of troopers marched steadily onward, defending themselves with results fatal to the enemy. For three hours this walking skirmish continued, until each moment increased the danger for the soldiers. Although the redskins had suffered considerable loss in men and ponies, the cavalry found their supply of ammunition diminished to the point of exhaustion. Night, or a quick reinforcement was the only hope, but it was still early in the day, and their comrades at Fort Wallace could have no knowledge of their predicament.

Meanwhile, the watchful Indian scouts posted along the high bluffs which bordered the prairie, had seen a faint, dark line on the horizon—a line which might be a break in the ground, the shadow of a cloud. But slowly it moved along, as if the cloud were driven by the winds, until, in a short time the Cheyennes discovered that it was a column of cavalry moving rapidly toward them. Three hours of continuous fighting and strenuous riding had exhausted the Indian ponies, and the chiefs decided to escape while there was still time. The reinforcements were at least two hours' journey away, but the cavalry horses would, no doubt, be in good shape for pursuit and be able to overtake the blown animals of the Indians.

At the moment the besieged were busily engaged attending to their casualties, of which, however, there were but few, they were startled by a sudden, furious hail of shot and arrows, after which the attackers quickly withdrew, disappearing over the hill from whence they came. An hour

(Continued On Page 110)

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(Continued From Page 108)

passed and the soldiers had new cause for apprehension—a body of horsemen were rapidly approaching. Another band of marauders, they thought, but the binoculars revealed the familiar blue tunics of the cavalrymen, and thus the hasty retreat of their assailants was explained. It was then that Major Elliot thanked the scout for his timely warning which saved many lives.

NEVERTHELESS, in spite of William Comstock's thorough knowledge of Indian lore, he apparently did not always distrust the red man, for, a few years later, a party of Cheyennes had camped not far from Big Spring Station, where he happened to be at the time. Riding out to their village with a single companion, a brother scout, they were both most hospitably entertained by the chief. An Indian was always ready to receive a white guest, and would give him the best fare at his command.

Comstock and his friend passed the afternoon pleasantly enough, and when the day was drawing to a close, made preparation to depart. The chief, with what seemed sincere cordiality, pressed them to stay for the night, but declining the invitation, they rode away. The pair had gone only a short distance when they noticed they were being followed by ten or twelve young bucks from the camp they had just quitted. Even this, suspicious as it was, excited no alarm in hardened frontiersmen like the two guides, so they permitted the braves to ride up alongside of them, exchanging the usual solemn salutations, "How, how!"

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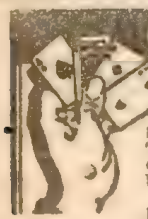

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(Continued From Page 110)

odds, the result was almost inevitable, and yet Comstock's partner, trusting to the speed of an excellent mount, managed to escape with only a few wounds.

His good fortune was perhaps due to the Cheyennes greater desire for his comrade's life. When he saw their purpose, Comstock was quickly at bay and without a thought of retreat, snatched for his ivory-handled six-shooter to defend himself. But the Indians were too many. Closing in around him, regardless of the shots from his pistol they managed to disarm him, regardless of the shots from his pistol, they managed to disarm him, and although the scout fought bravely, he was struck down.

The reason for this atrocity is a singular commentary on the stories in which the exaulted redman so often figures as a hero. These young bloods had no particular desire to avenge the wrongs of their race upon the scout whose skill had often caused their defeat, nor did they think much of the glory to be gained by outwitting this formidable foe; the motive was one which any white man could readily understand. Bill Comstock had for some time carried that beautiful ivory-handled revolver, and the young bucks had always coveted it, finally taking this means of gaining possession of the trophy.

But how could this one weapon benefit the whole party? Easily enough managed: The Indians were inveterate gamesters, ready at a moment's notice to gamble their dearest possession under any circumstance. So when the triumphant party had secured the prize, together with the scalp, clothing and saddle of the scout, they proceeded to determine who among them should be the favored owner of each article, and gambled on the spot for William Comstock's personal effects.

THE END

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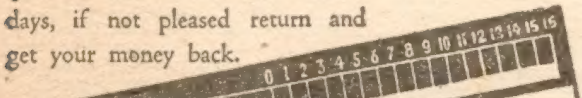

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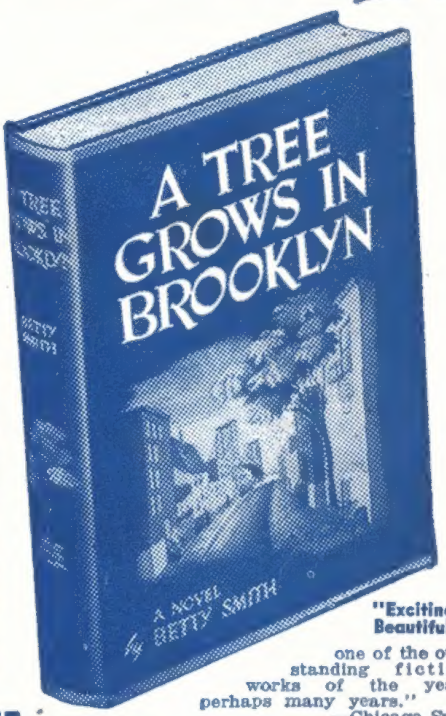

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